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The Next Generation

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They say change can be scary, but for video games, it occurs often and almost always carries the promise of excitement and never-before-seen experiences. We're just months away from change sweeping through video games again. PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X are both hitting this holiday season with what we hope will be advanced technology that once again elevates our favorite entertainment medium to new heights.

We'll have to wait to see how the two machines differ in terms of performance, but a key story is already unfolding before they even have release dates and prices. With PlayStation 5, Sony is taking a traditional approach and is treating it as a definitive start of a new generation. This means many developers are making games that will only work on PlayStation 5. With Xbox Series X, Microsoft is going in a new direction of blending generations. Halo Infinite may be optimized to take advantage of Xbox Series X's hardware, but it will also work on Xbox One, meaning the player doesn't need to buy a new machine to play it.

The upcoming generation likely won't be defined by these different approaches, but they will set the tone early, and should make for an exciting debut for both consoles.

As we wait to see when these machines hit and how much they cost, the current generation isn't going down without a fight. Two of the biggest games of year – and perhaps of the entire console generation – are hitting days apart with the release of Assassin's Creed Valhalla on November 17 and Cyberpunk 2077 on November 19. Yes, you can wait to play these games on the new machines, but I also can't think of a better way to close out a generation than with two juggernauts. If the games are as big as we expect, we just need to figure out how to carve out over 100 hours of play time for each.

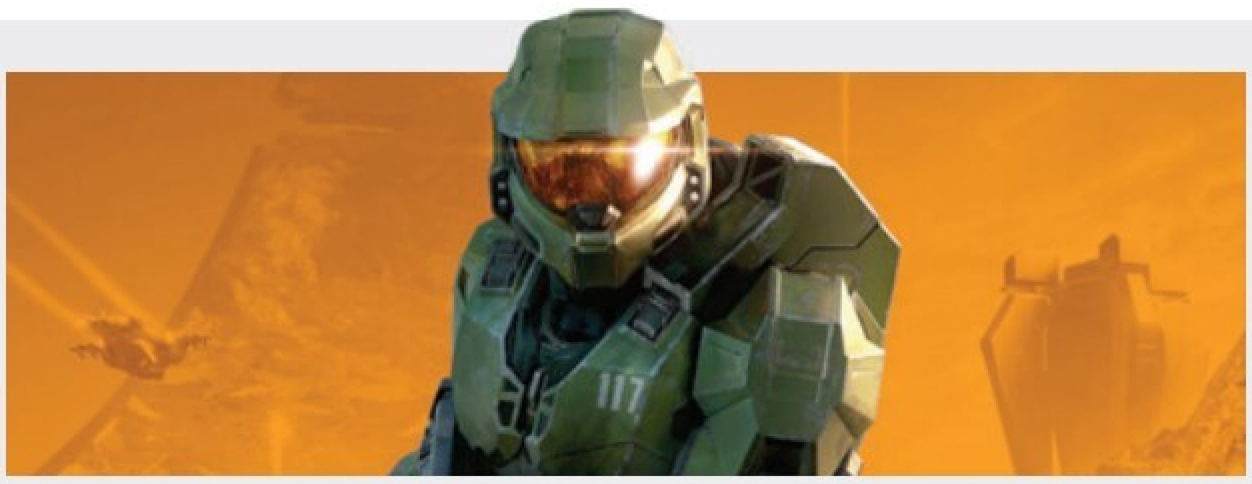
Change is also coming to the pages of *Game Informer*. While this letter is still penned by an "Andy," it's not the one that has been on this page for nearly 30 years. Andy McNamara has moved on to new adventures at Electronic Arts, and I've been given the chance to helm this amazing ship – something I've had a hand in for my entire adult life. I started at *Game Informer* when I was just 19 years old, and worked closely with Andy almost every day to bring you over 300 issues.

As we move forward into the next generation of games, I will uphold the legacy Andy helped establish, and will also work closely with *Game Informer*'s brilliant writers, artists, designers, programmers, and video talent to bring new ideas to the magazine, digital edition, and website. I'd also like to hear from you, the readers, about your thoughts on our work past and present.

The issue you hold in your hands gives you further insight into Microsoft's plans for Xbox Series X, and also provides a deep dive into Watch Dogs: Legion (a game that straddles both current- and next-gen machines), along with similarly information-packed looks at Assassin's Creed Valhalla and Marvel's Avengers. Enjoy the issue, folks!

Be safe. Be happy. And game on!

30 **Watch Dogs: Legion**
Ubisoft Toronto takes Watch Dogs across the pond for the long-awaited sequel, but that's not the only leap that Legion brings. We spent several hours exploring its detailed city simulation, and have stories that show just how deep it gets. ***by Jeff Cork***



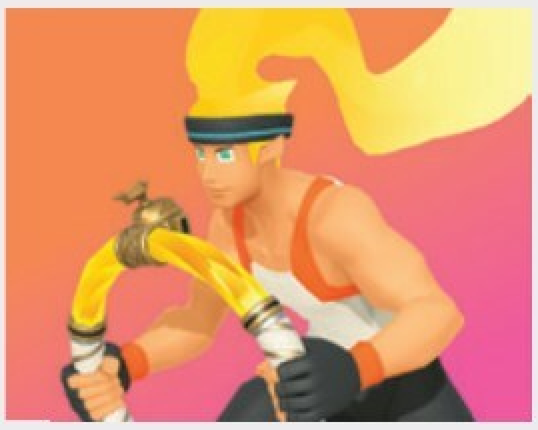
10 **The Promise Of Xbox**
Microsoft presented a new look at its upcoming offerings, and we have the rundown of the biggest games.

18 **Creating Extinction**
Art director Yoji Shinkawa explains the process of designing Death Stranding's bleak-but-striking visuals.

22 **Afterwords: The Last Of Us Part II**
Creative director Neil Druckmann and narrative lead Halley Gross give us some spoiler-filled insight about Naughty Dog's masterpiece.

24 **Afterwords: Final Fantasy VII Remake**
How did the team behind Final Fantasy VII Remake navigate fan expectations? Producer Yoshinori Kitase and co-director Naoki Hamaguchi answer that question and more.

44 **Marvel's Avengers**
We learn more about Crystal Dynamics' super-powered action game to find out if Earth's Mightiest Heroes can win over the crowd.



26 **Gear**
This month we have an array of action figures and board games, as well as tech for the fitness-focused.

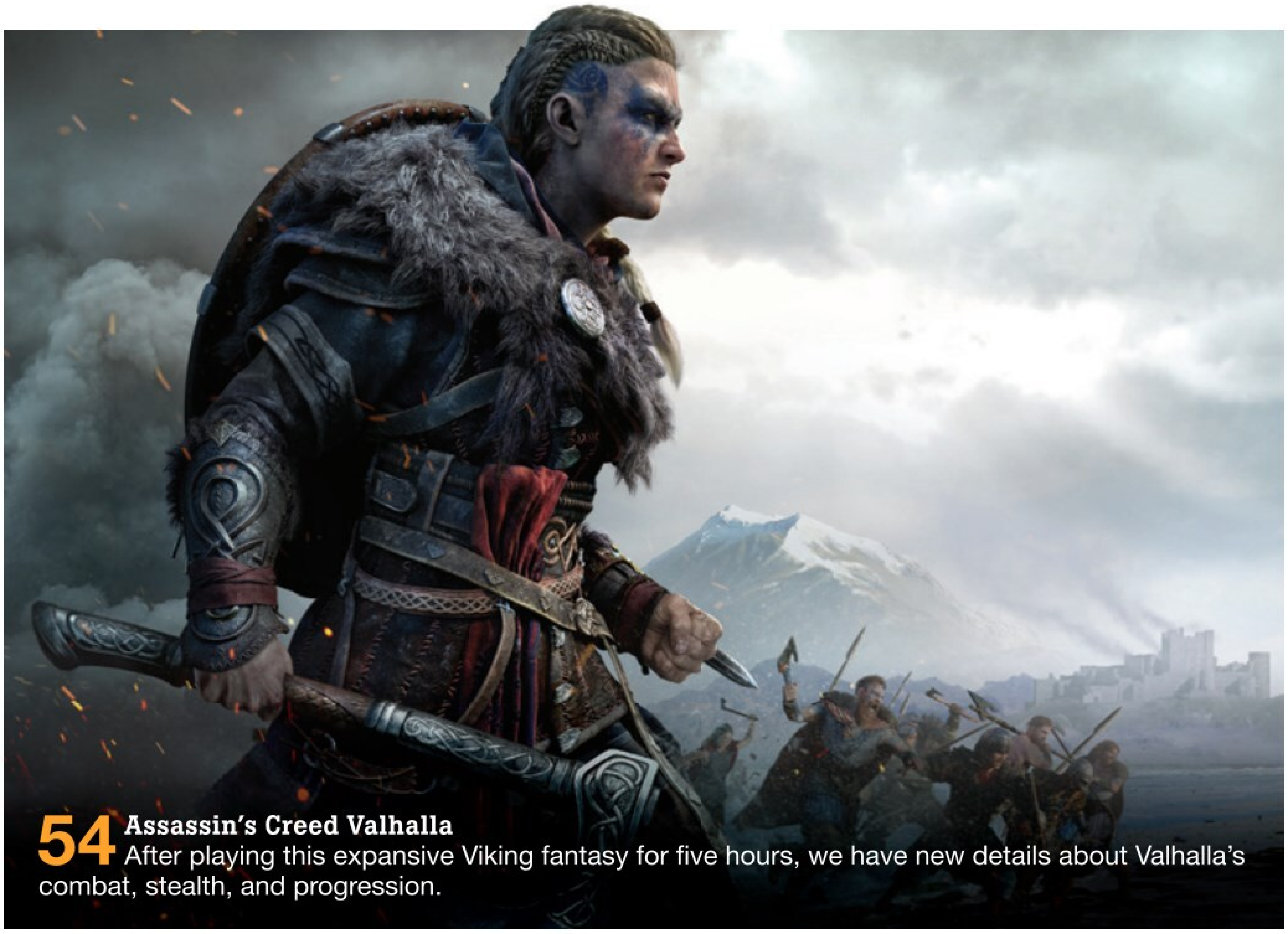
06 **Feedback**

20 **Top Ten Health Items**

60 **Previews**

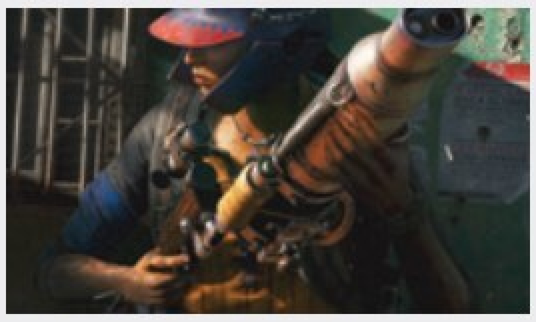
72 **Reviews**

84 **Game Over: Who's That Good Boy?**



54 **Assassin's Creed Valhalla**
After playing this expansive Viking fantasy for five hours, we have new details about Valhalla's combat, stealth, and progression.

60 **Star Wars Squadrons** Turn on your targeting computer and charge up your ion cannons as both good and evil pilots.



62 **Far Cry 6** Actor Giancarlo Esposito (*Breaking Bad*) stars in the latest installment of Ubisoft's shooter series.

64 **Flight Simulator** Take to the skies with the classic franchise that defined realistic in-game flight.

65 **Spiritfarer** Hands-on with this stylish, cozy simulation about death and saying goodbye.

67 **Kingdom Hearts Melody Of Memory** In this music/rhythm game, the series' iconic soundtrack takes center stage.

74 **Ghost Of Tsushima** Violence and serenity share the spotlight in Sucker Punch's open-world samurai epic.

68 **World Of Warcraft: Shadowlands** We played WoW's upcoming expansion to see how the endgame is evolving.

76 **Paper Mario: The Origami King** Being flat is good for 2D visuals, but not when it comes to gameplay.

81 **Deadly Premonition 2: A Blessing In Disguise** The cult classic finally gets a sequel, but are the quirks still charming 10 years later?

games index

As Dusk Falls. 13
Assassin's Creed Valhalla 54
Avowed 13
Balan Wonderworld 12
Bloodstained:
  Curse of the Moon 2 80
Carrion 82
CrossfireX 71
Deadly Premonition 2 81
Death Stranding 18
Destiny 2: Beyond Light. 15
Destroy All Humans 79
Echo Generation 16
Everwild 16
ExoMecha 12
Fable 12
Far Cry 6 62
Final Fantasy VII Remake 24
Flight Simulator 64
Forza Motorsport. 14
Fuser. 69
Ghost of Tsushima. 74
Gunk, The 14
Halo Infinite. 11
Hyper Scape 66
Kingdom Hearts
  Melody of Memory 67
Last of Us Part II, The 22
Marvel's Avengers. 44
Marvel's Iron Man VR 78
Medium, The 12
Outer Worlds:
  Peril on Gorgon, The 13
Paper Mario:
  The Origami King. 76
Phantasy Star Online 2:
  New Genesis 15
Rocket Arena. 77
Spiritfarer 65
Stalker 2 14
State of Decay 3 15
Star Wars Squadrons. 60
Tell Me Why. 14
Tetris Effect: Connected 12
UFC 4 70
Warhammer 40,000 Darktide . . 16
Watch Dogs: Legion 30
World of Warcraft:
  Shadowlands. 68

PlayStation
"9.5 out of 10. A samurai epic of tremendous breadth and beauty."
– Game Informer
GHOST
OF TSUSHIMA
AVAILABLE NOW
Only On PlayStation.
MATURE 17+
M
ESRB
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Partial Nudity
AVAILABLE AT GameStop
SP
SUCKER PUNCH

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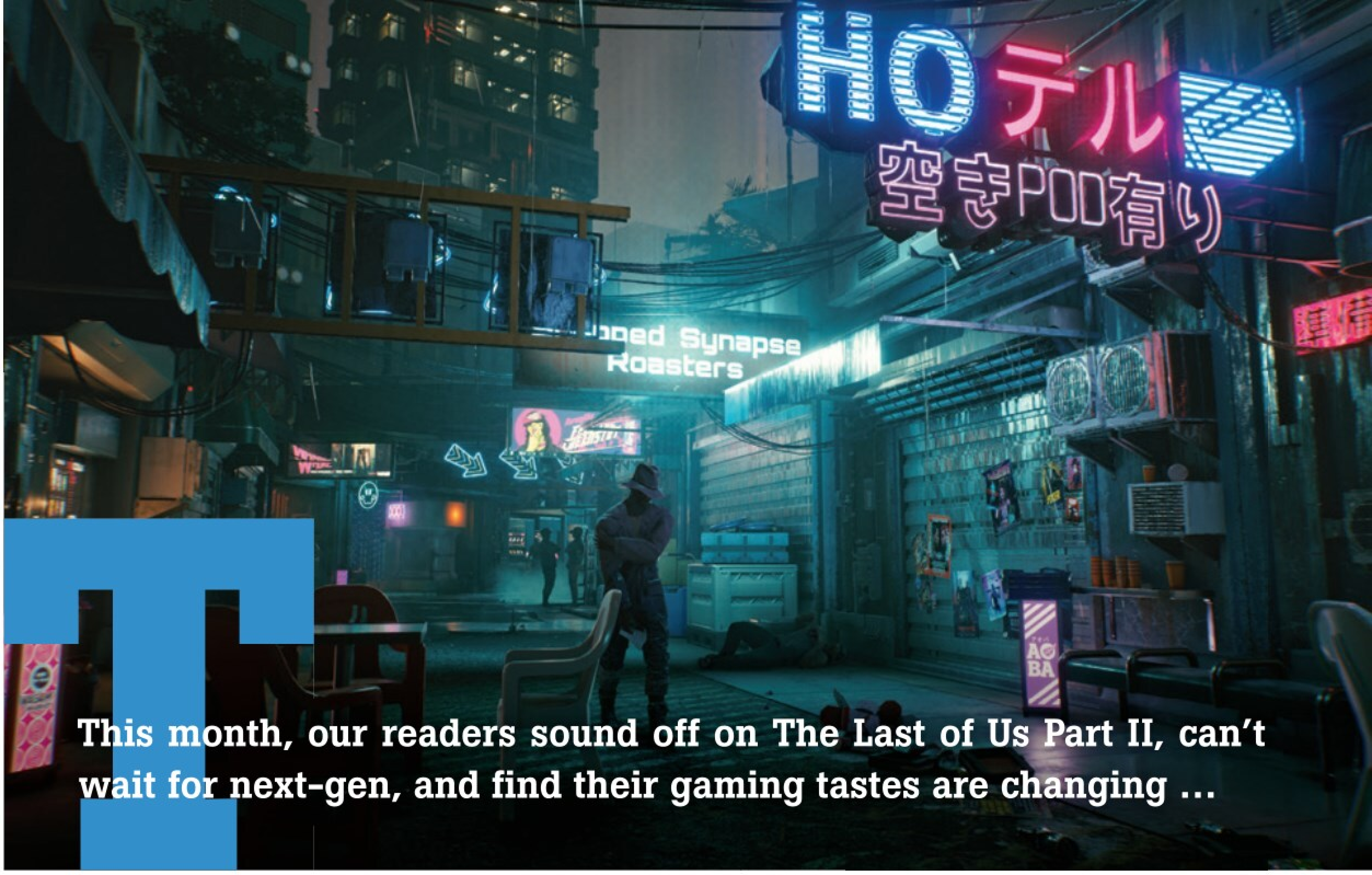
feedback



This month, our readers sound off on The Last of Us Part II, can't wait for next-gen, and find their gaming tastes are changing …

Cyberpunk 2077

I read the Cyberpunk 2077 cover story in one sitting, and I can't wait to get my hands on that game! You all made it sound like it's going to be one of this generation's defining games. I hope that ends up being the case. Even if it is everything we want, it's going to bring up the problem: Should CD Projekt Red make a new Witcher next or Cyberpunk 2078? Bethesda has that problem with Fallout and Elder Scrolls. We still don't have a sequel to Skyrim!

Lazarus Lightning
Chandler, AZ

Holy cow. Cyberpunk 2077 is epic! The information you shared last issue is eye-opening and I can barely believe they are capable of doing that kind of stuff in a game. The idea of "Braindancing" is weird and I can't quite wrap my mind around it yet, but I want to jack in and see what out-of-body experiences await me. Thanks again for being awesome, GI! I was wondering when you would do a cover story on this game, and you knocked it out of the cyberpark!

Elizabeth Schoop
Pearl City, HI

Cyberpunk 2077 is going to be hundreds of hours long, isn't it? I can tell you already that I'll probably spend my first three hours just designing my character! I get to pick what their backstory is and that changes the game?! WHAT?! I also get to design every part of their body, right down to the you know what bad stuff? WHHHATTTT?! I can't wait. Give it to me now!

Wilson Fisk
via email

Debating The Last Of Us Part II

I can't believe The Last of Us Part II got a perfect 10! Did I play the same game you did? It made me feel gross, uneasy, and disturbed the whole time. I didn't like where the story started or went. I kept hoping it would get better and it didn't for 26 hours. What a disappointment! I'd give it a 6!

Terrance Williams
Orange Beach, AL

When you go to play a video game, I think the ideal scenario is to feel like you're watching this amazing movie that you're able to live out at the same time. The Last of Us Part II 100 percent did that for me. I don't know if I've ever felt that many different emotions during a single playthrough of a game, so endless thanks to Naughty Dog for allowing me to have that experience. It's one I'll never forget.

Aaron M
via email

The Last of Us Part II is a wild ride. I didn't like it as much as the first, mainly because the ending was so much better, but I think it was better from moment to moment. That game kept me off balance and actually terrified me at times. Needless to say, I was entertained from start to finish. Do you think we'll get a third game?

Sidney Winter
Oakland, CA

The Last of Us Part II is receiving mixed reviews from players and critics alike. Given how many chances Naughty Dog takes with the story and characters, it's not surprising that opinions are all over the place.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Our critic loved it, you may not have, and that's perfectly fine. Opinions make for great conversations and debates. Will we see a third entry in The Last of Us? We don't want to give away any spoilers here, but we can say that much of the series' world remains unexplored. We'd love to see what's happening in different countries. There's always room for a sequel or prequel, whether with the same characters or not.

Animal Crossing, GOTY

Is there a chance Animal Crossing: New Horizons could win game of the year? I have a feeling The Last of Us Part II might be divided with votes, but everyone likes spending time on their island.

Hazel Valentina
via email

You may be right about The Last of Us Part II being a polarizing game for our end-of-year awards. Not all of *Game Informer*'s editors have played through it yet, and there's a chance some may not like it. Animal Crossing: New Horizons is a beloved game by many in the office, but there's still plenty of 2020 to go. With PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X, and huge releases still on the way, Game of the Year honors could go any which way, even with a game like The Last of Us Part II receiving a rare 10 out of 10.

PlayStation 5 HYPE!

The roundup of games you had for PlayStation 5 in the last issue was insane! We're getting new Spider-Man, Horizon, and Ratchet & Clank games soon. They all look ridiculously cool. My question for you, *Game Informer*: Sony is tailoring these games exclusively to PlayStation 5 hardware, but Microsoft is making all of its first-party games work on both Xbox Series X and Xbox One. Which approach is better?

Luke Jurgens
via email

That's a great question, and we can't say either approach is better at this phase. Microsoft is looking at the larger install base, since its first-party games will likely be on PC as well. Getting a game in front of more people is never a bad thing, but will people be compelled to play it on Series X? That's the big question. Are the enhancements on the new hardware worth justifying a purchase? We won't know the answer to that until Series X launches later this year. Sony is taking the classic console approach, which has been tried and true for generations. As you pointed out, this is an interesting difference between the Playstation 5 and Xbox Series X, and could be a big factor in which system people flock to.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

I'm a big JRPG fan and I would love to see Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest crossover using Akira Toriyama's art style and Final Fantasy X's gameplay. What do you think of that idea?

That's a fantastic idea for a game. On that note, Square Enix has had these two franchises unite before, but not for an entire game. The Breaking Brick Mountains event in Final Fantasy XIV is one example.

What happened to the Lego games? We used to get like three of them a year.

After pumping games out using a defined format, TT Games is introducing a newly designed experience in the upcoming Lego Star Wars: Skywalker Saga game. Once that game is out, we wouldn't be surprised if that new framework is used for more licenses.

Best Comment:

"All games get delayed eventually, right? Could we delay the rest of 2020? We just need a few months of sanity."

Question Of The Month:

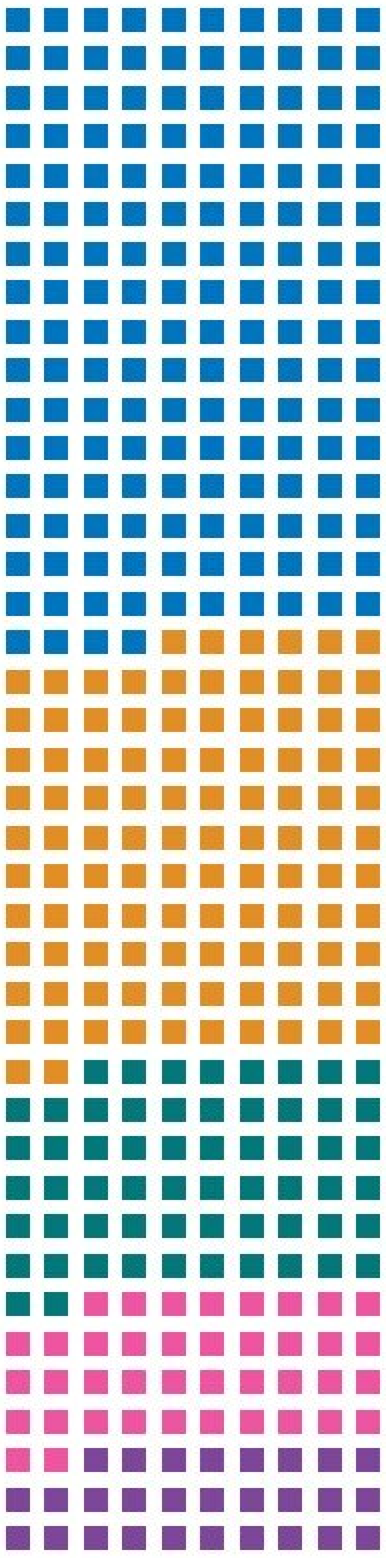
Which next-generation game are you most excited to play?

gi spy

(Left) Odd Bug Studio turned a living room into a development studio to continue working on Tails of Iron **(Right)** PR pro Zac Gunnel prepares a pitch for Suda

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



- 🟦 Want next-generation pricing and release dates
- 🟧 Have comments on The Last of Us Part II
- 🟩 Are excited for a new Spider-Man game
- 🟥 Don't like the design of PlayStation 5
- 🟪 Like the design of PlayStation 5

Star Wars Done Right

That new Star Wars: Squadrons game seems like an anomaly in gaming today. It's only $40, and won't have any DLC? This reminds me of the days where we'd just get everything on a cartridge or disc. I hope the business model EA is using is successful. I'd like to buy more games knowing that I'm getting everything at once and won't have to worry about what comes down the road or needing to open my wallet again to get something else for it.

Bastion Ordway
via email

When we first found out about Star Wars: Squadrons, we were immediately reminded of the awesome X-Wing series of old. It really does appear to be a game born of yesteryear, and we absolutely love that. Publishers continue to explore the landscape of games in different ways, whether it's through pricing models or content, and Squadrons seems to be turning heads for this just as much as the Star Wars name.

The Animal At Your Side

Last month, we asked readers what their ideal video game pet would be. Here are their responses …

The Arctic fox from Never Alone. It was such an emotional figure in the game and the animators did so much in terms of expression that you knew the fox was completely involved in helping its charge survive the trials. Such a beautiful bit of whimsy in a small but thoughtful game.

Joy Wilson
via email

I have to go with the blob from A Boy and His Blob. You just feed the blob jelly beans and it can transform into any useful object you may need around the house. You may not want to cuddle with it, but I'd rather have a pet that transforms into a ladder than one that sits in my lap.

Charles Winwood
via email

A toss up between Mega Man's Rush and Fallout's Dogmeat. Both are loyal dogs who are there to keep you safe and happy.

Lola Narcisse
Murray, KY

I grew up watching Pokémon and even pretended my stuffed Pikachu was real, so it has to be him. He was my childhood best bud.

Ken Masuda
via email

(Left) Koch Media/Deep Silver's Alex Q. Ryan cracks into the swag reserves as he preps Wasteland 3 and Iron Harvest for launch next month **(Right)** Insomniac's Bryan Intihar is joined by a friend for a little work on his next game

WINNER

1 Katherine Lorenzo
Eating Aloy is going to give that giant, robotic dinosaur some serious stomach trouble.

2 Travis Loukas
Mario got buff for his Little Shop of Horrors audition.

3 Sarah Nottingham
You don't have to be a Pokémon expert to figure out who doesn't belong at this meeting of the Big Floofy Ears Club. Hint: It's the one with fins.

4 Tara Ackley, Age 10
Fun fact: Omitting Donald Duck from any Kingdom Hearts art automatically makes it 100 percent better.

5 Alyson Matson
If Raz and Lili use their powers to help out, maybe it won't take Tom Nook a whole day to build a dumb bridge.

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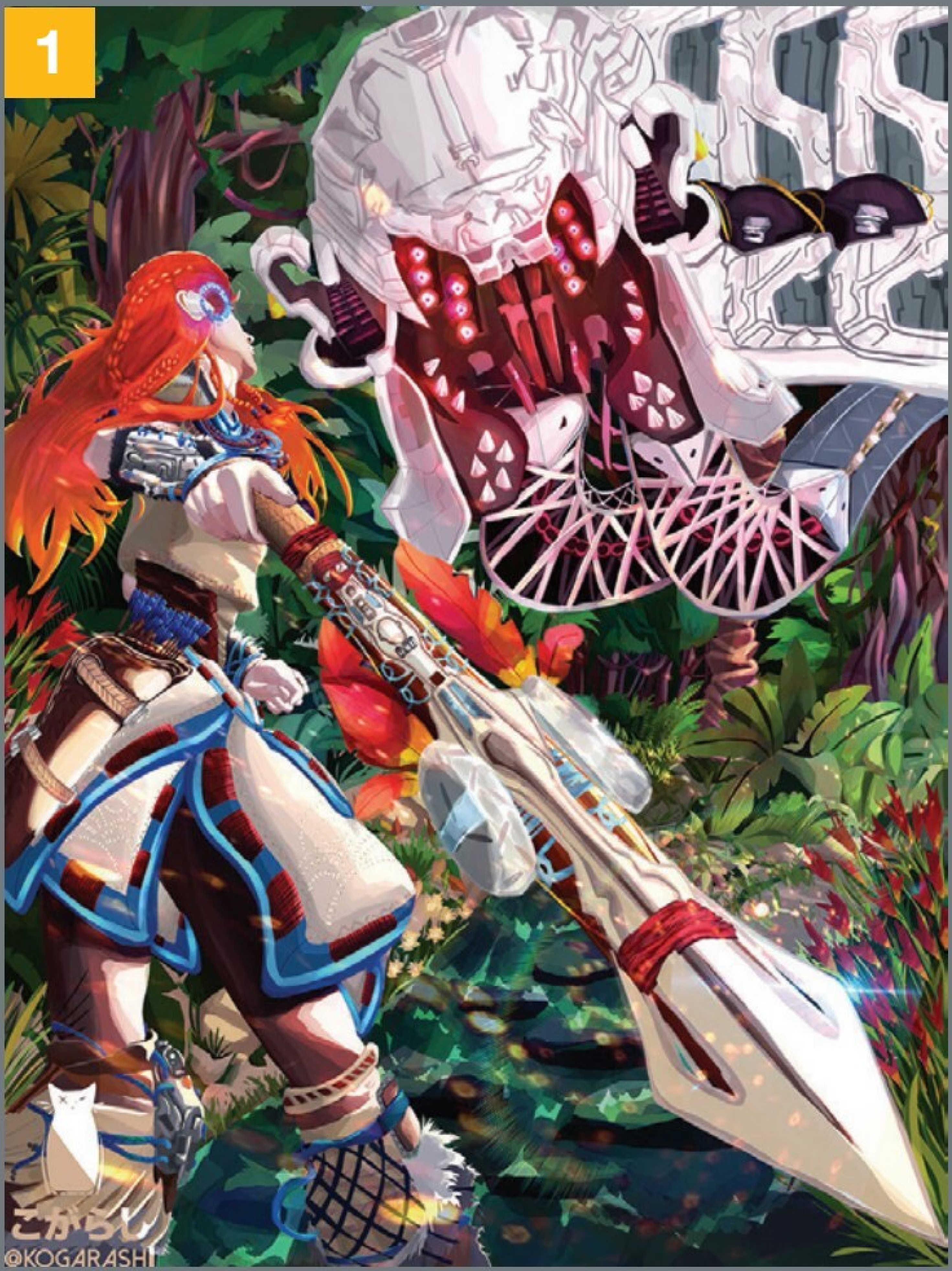

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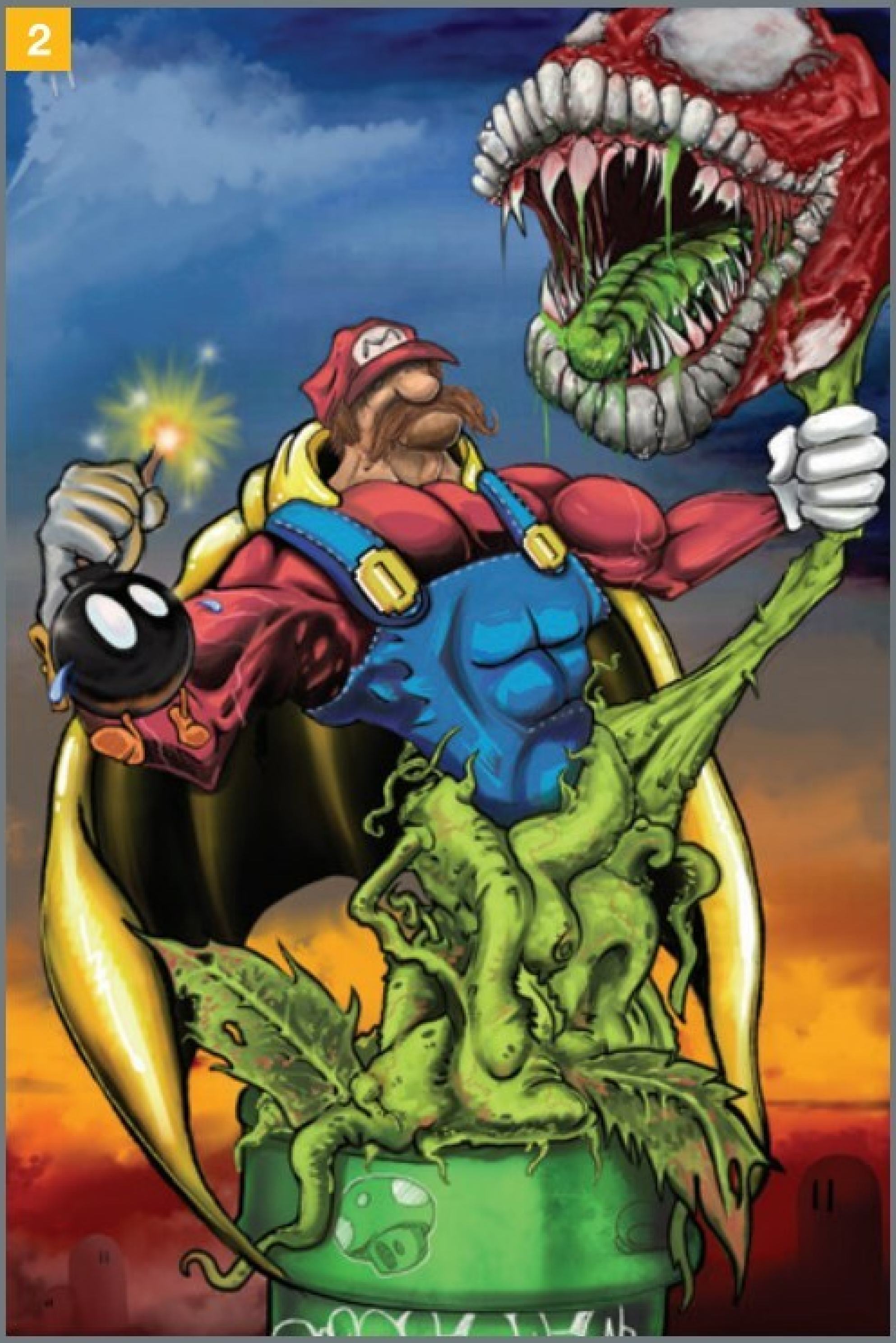

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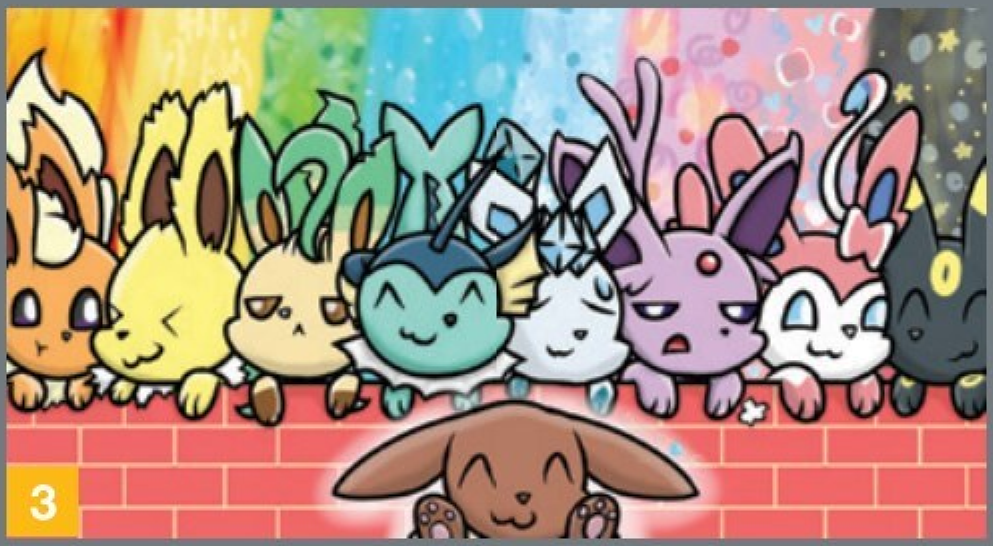

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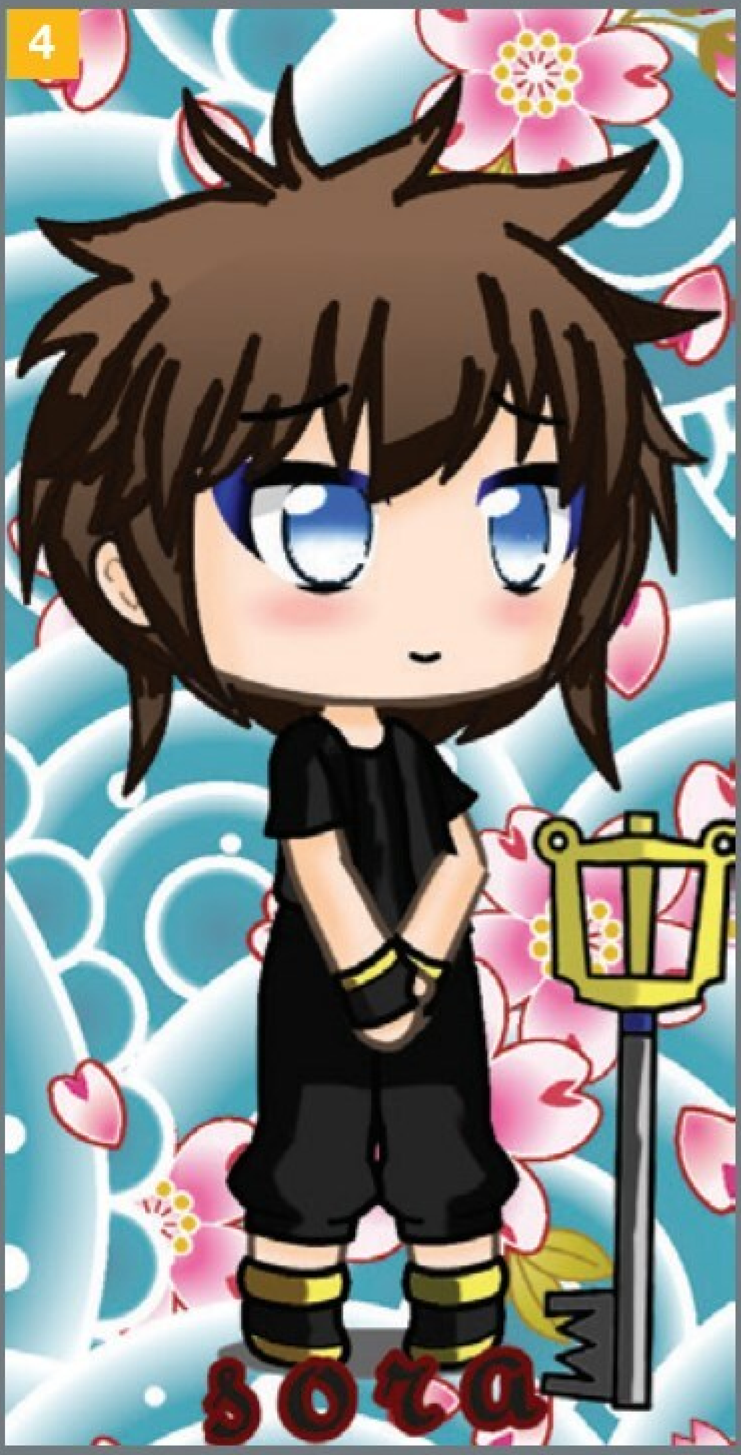

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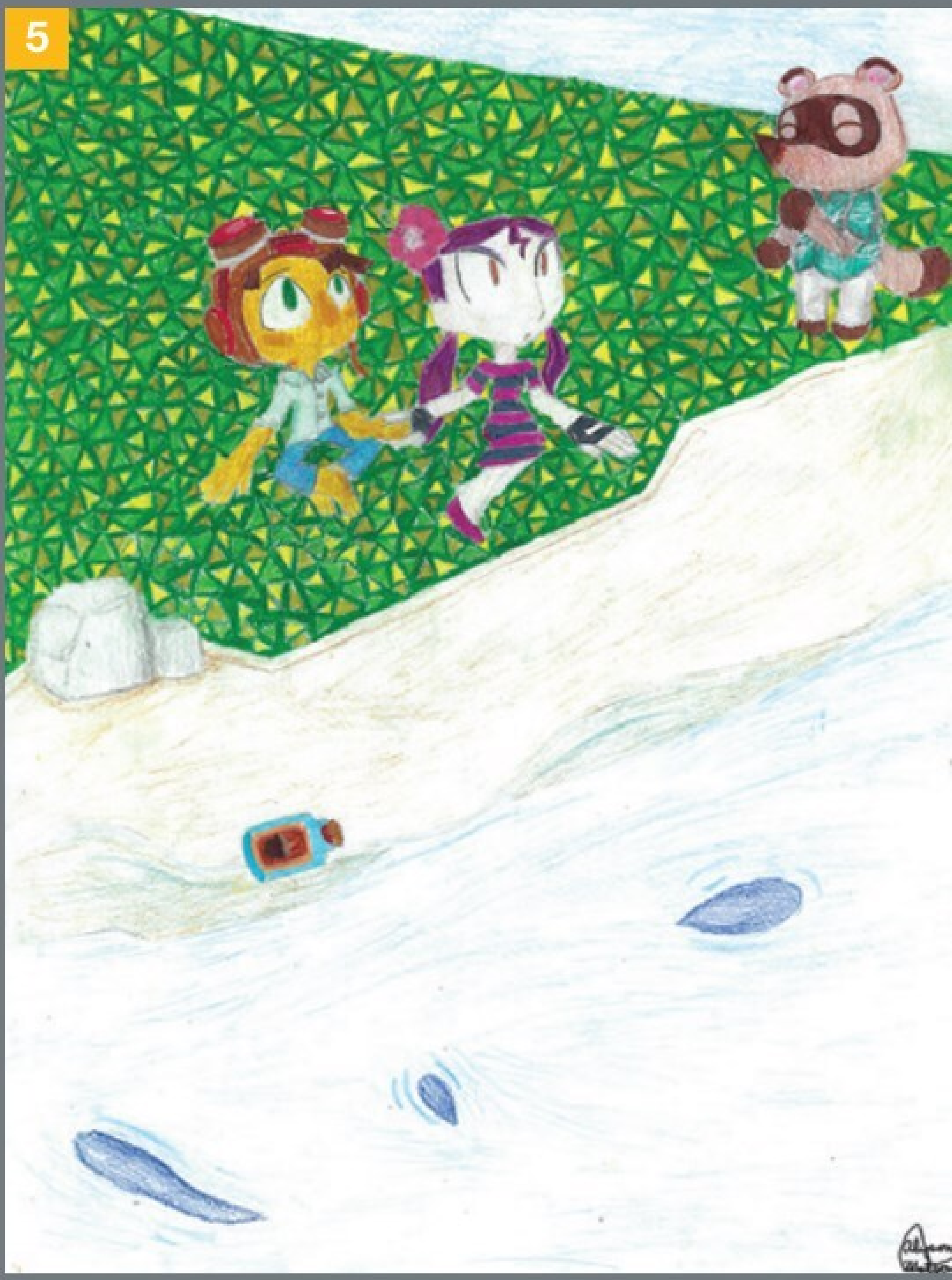

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OF XBOX

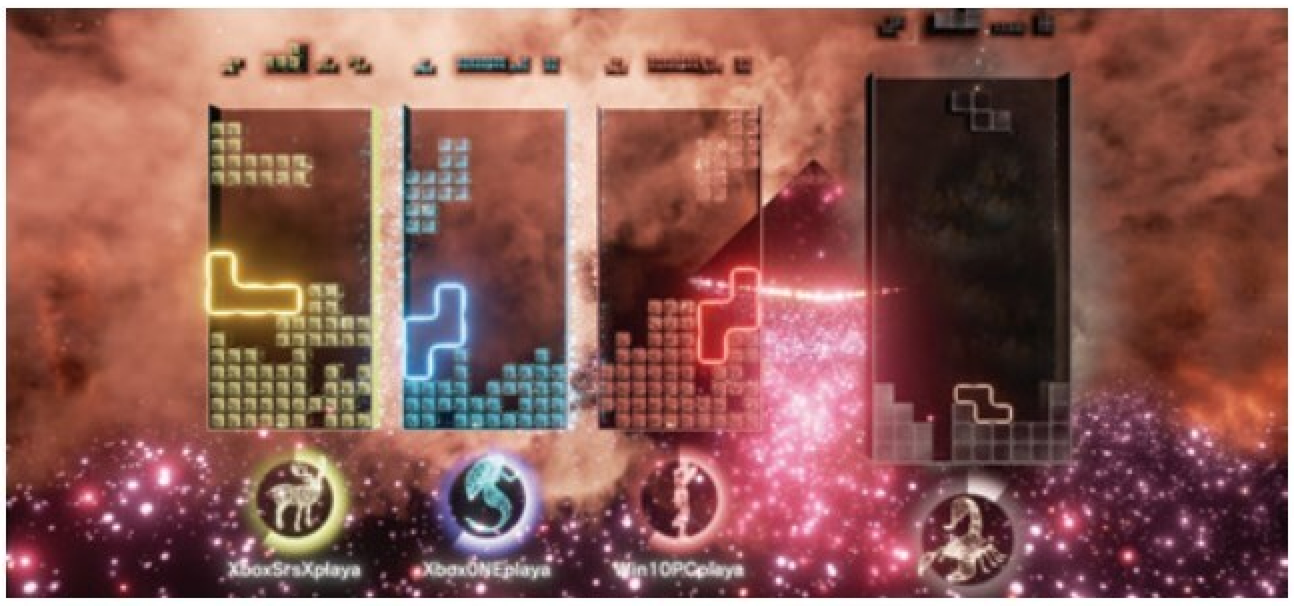
[redacted]

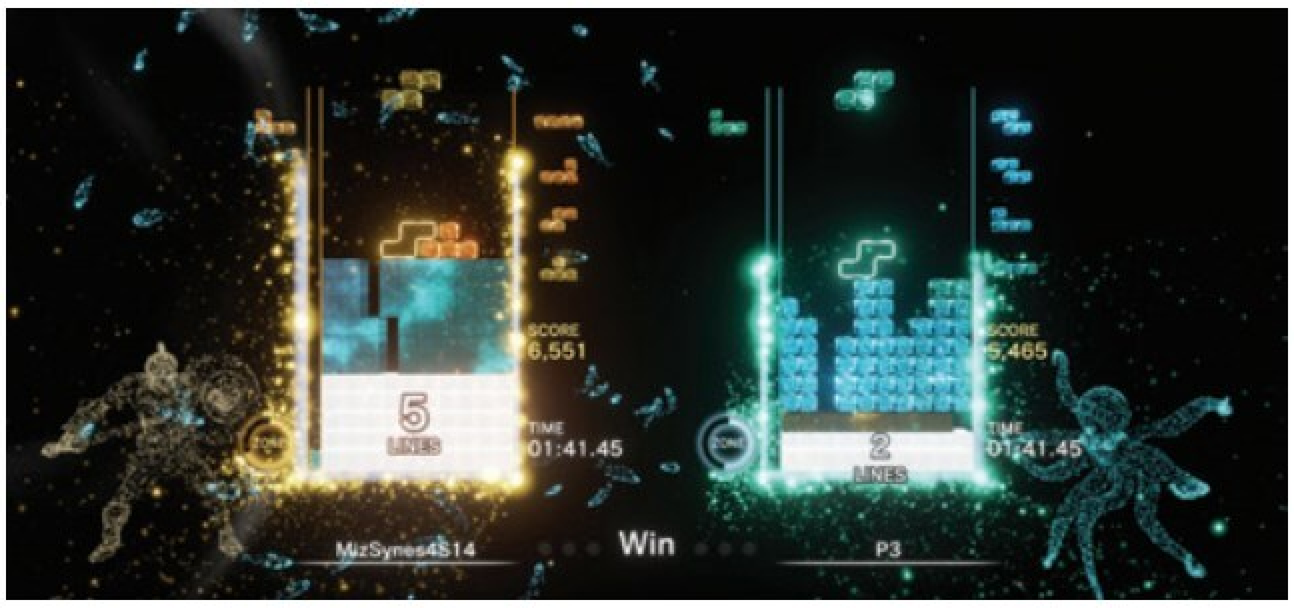
FABLE

Rumors have been swirling for years, but Microsoft finally made it official: Fable is coming back. This revival represents a fresh start for the series, with Playground Games (the studio behind Forza Horizon) developing a new installment in the RPG franchise originally created by Lionhead Studios. Though this initial reveal is is light on details, Microsoft confirmed that Fable will release on Xbox Series X and PC.

TETRIS EFFECT: CONNECTED

The gorgeous Tetris Effect has wowed players on other platforms since 2018, and Xbox is finally getting into the block-dropping action; Tetris Effect: Connected arrives for all major Microsoft platforms alongside the Series X launch. The new version adds both competitive and cooperative multiplayer options, including an intriguing mode where up to three players work together and merge their playfields to defeat a series of bosses. Pre-existing versions of Tetris Effect get the multiplayer modes free in summer 2021.



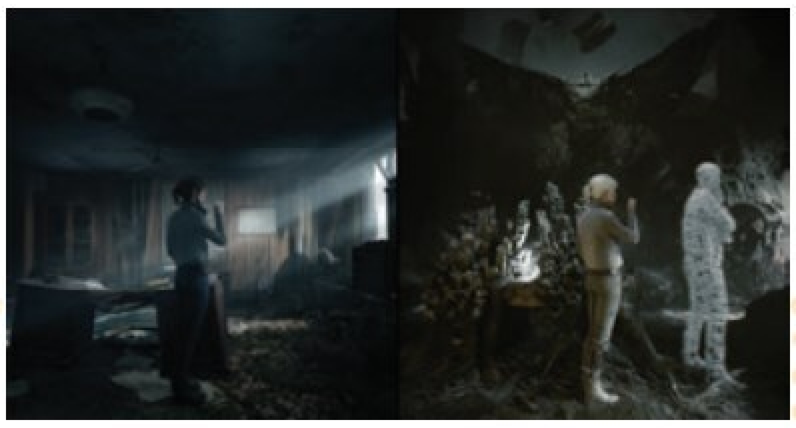


EXOMECHA

Developer TwistedRed served up a heaping helping of chrome action with its newly revealed FPS, coming to Xbox Series X, Xbox One, and PC in 2021. Players shoot it out on massive playfields while scooting about at high speed on hoverboards, and battling alongside towering mechs, tanks, and robotic dragons. The focus is on team-based, large-scale battles, and includes objective modes and a promised new twist on battle royale.

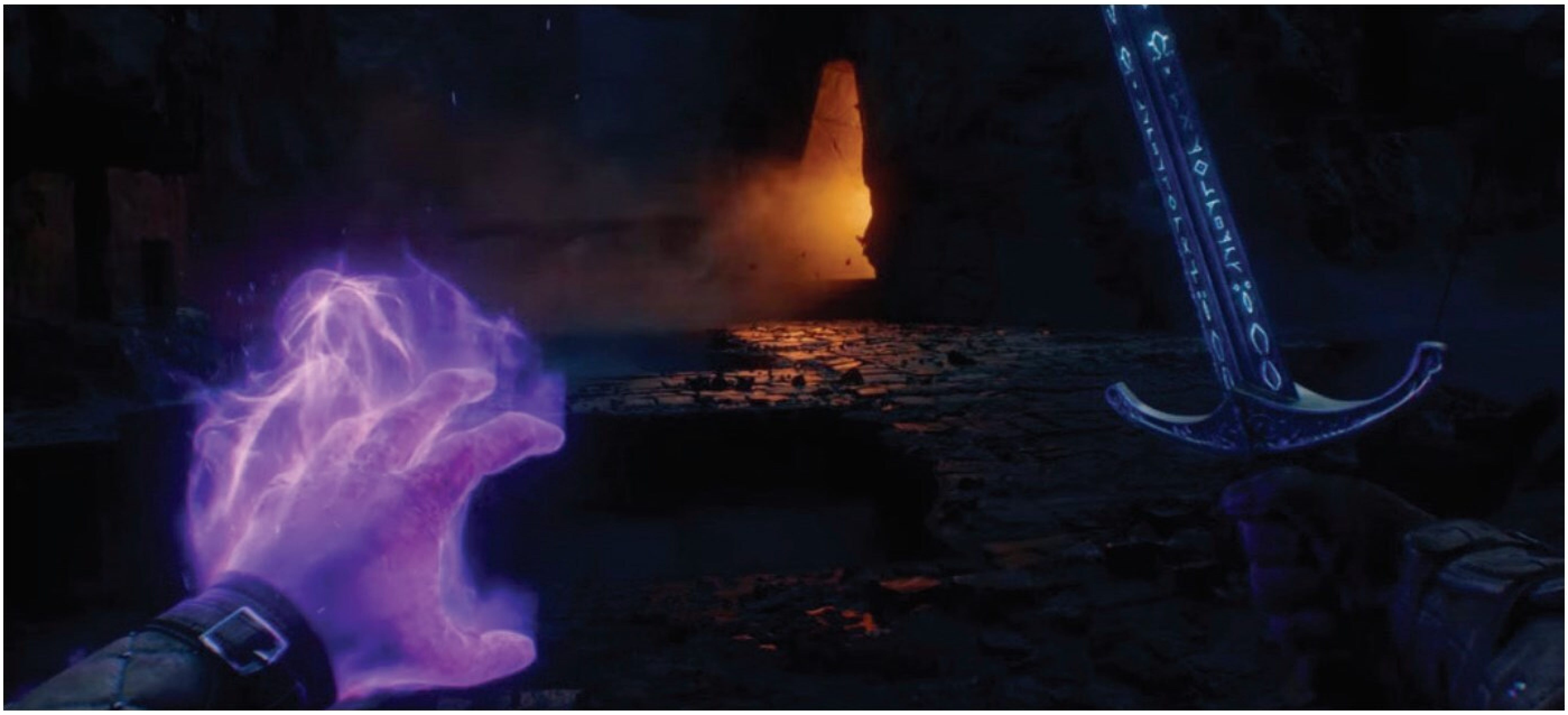
THE MEDIUM

Horror games often play with the idea of a paranormal world layered beneath our own reality. Bloober Team takes that concept and runs with it in The Medium, giving players the opportunity to switch between the physical and spirit realms at will. You swap between two simultaneously rendered versions of the game as you solve puzzles and the mystery of what happened to a murdered girl. You do have special powers in the spirit world, and it looks like you'll need them this holiday season on Xbox Series X and PC.



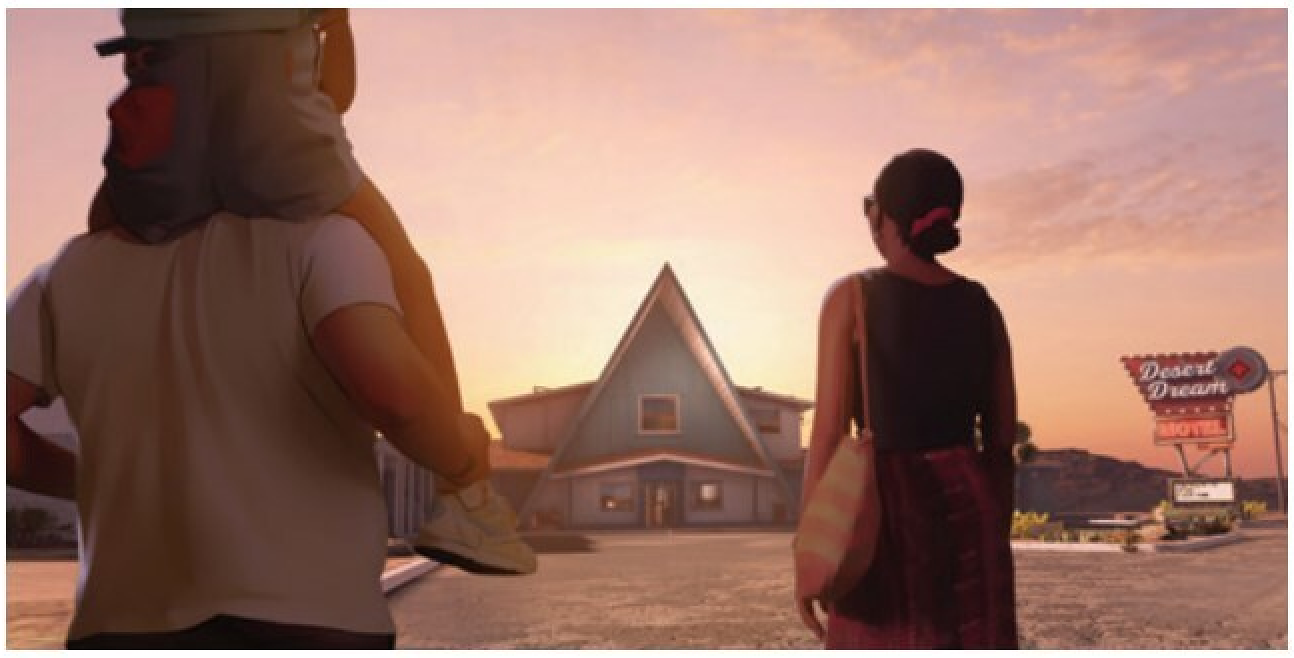
BALAN WONDERWORLD

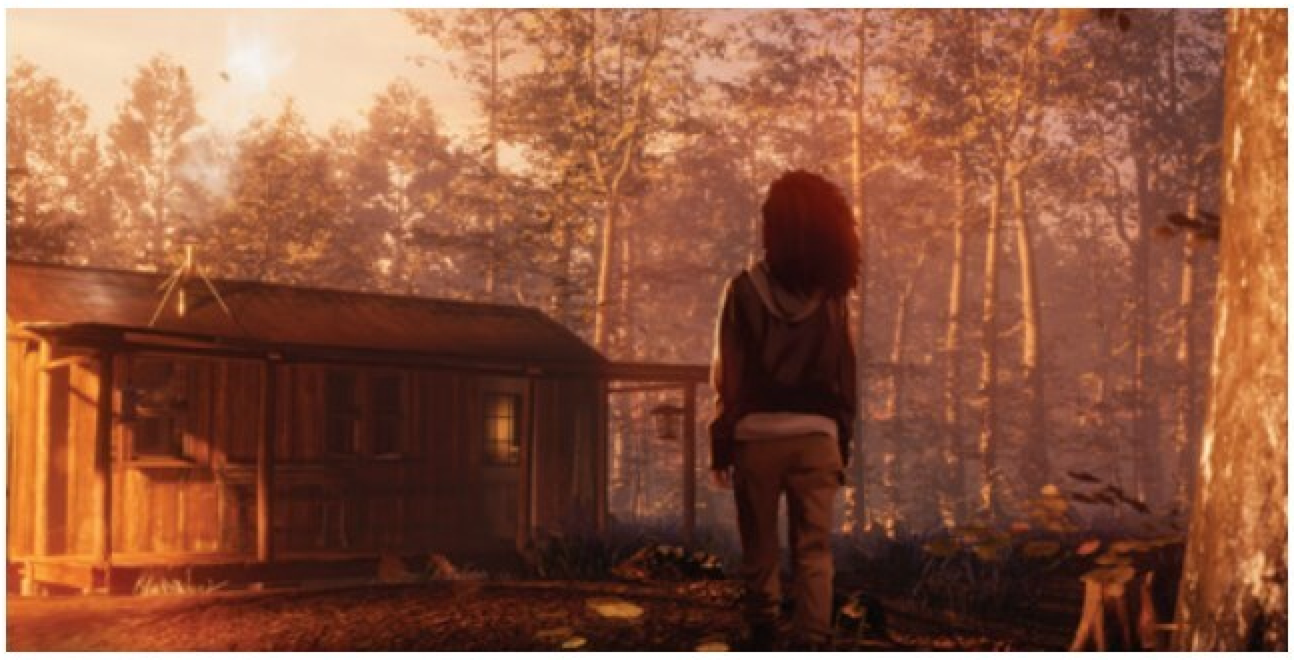
Director Yuji Naka and artist Naoto Oshima, best known for their defining work on Sonic the Hedgehog, are teaming up again for a brand-new project at publisher Square Enix. Revealed during the showcase pre-show, this colorful action/platformer has a unique theatrical theme, with players donning costumes that bestow unique abilities. Balan Wonderworld is releasing in spring 2021 for PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC.



AVOWED

Obsidian Entertainment has multiple development teams firing on all cylinders. Along with work continuing on The Outer Worlds and Grounded, Obsidian is developing a first-person fantasy RPG called Avowed. Looking at the screenshot above, if your mind immediately recalls fond memories of The Elder Scrolls series, you are not alone. The Outer Worlds clearly drew inspiration from the Fallout games, and we wouldn't be surprised if Avowed has a keen eye for Bethesda's other major RPG franchise. Avowed takes place in the world of Eora, the setting of Obsidian's Pillars of Eternity series, which is filled with creatures, warring factions, and what appears to be a rampaging skeleton army.



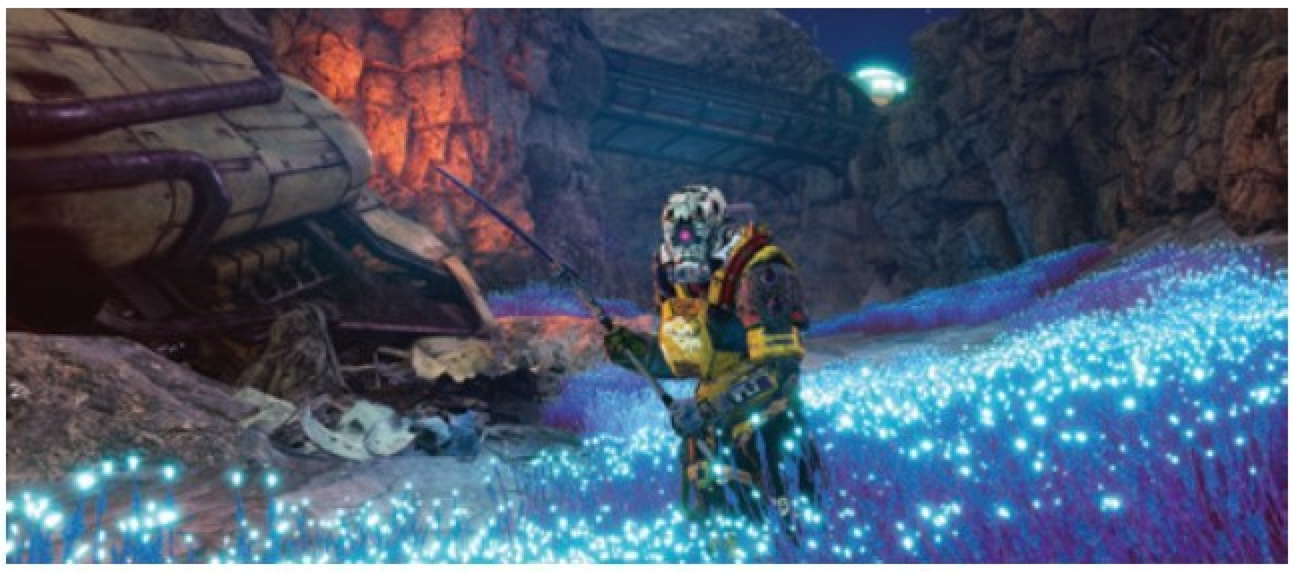


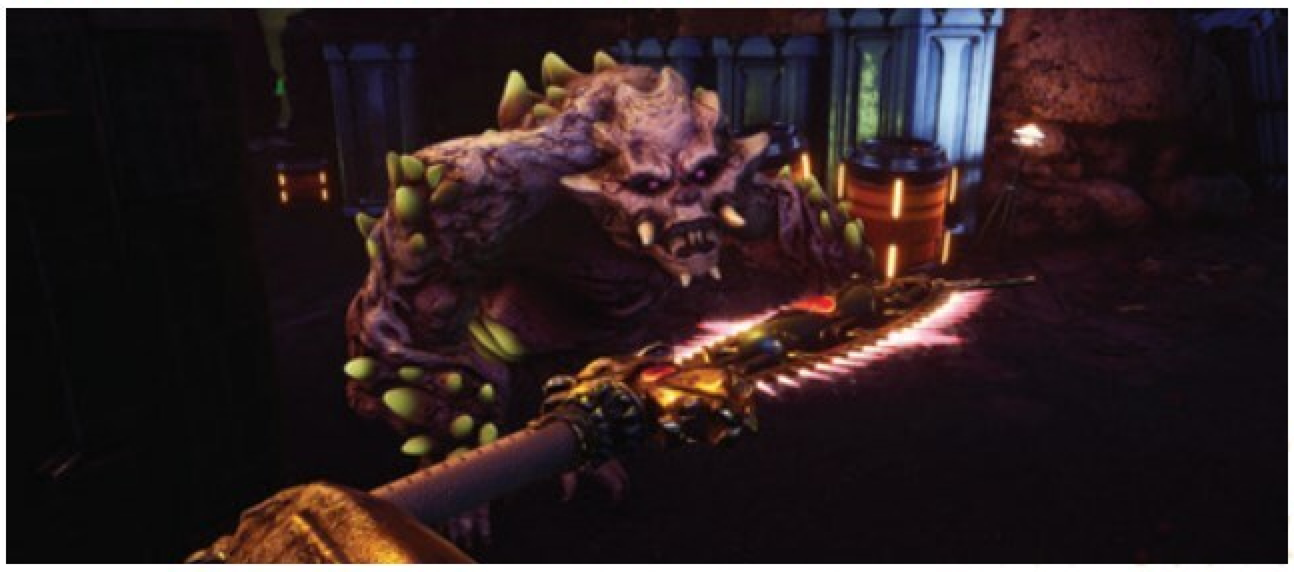
AS DUSK FALLS

Interior/Night is headed by former Quantic Dream lead game designer Caroline Marchal, and the studio's ambitious first game has a narrative that spans decades. Set in the American Southwest, As Dusk Falls follows two families who are connected by a traumatic hostage situation. Players explore how that event transforms the lives of its victims over time through what looks like a beautifully illustrated interactive novel.

THE OUTER WORLDS: PERIL ON GORGON

Return to the Halcyon colony in Peril on Gorgon, Obsidian's first set of DLC for last year's hit action/RPG The Outer Worlds. The crew of *The Unreliable* gets up to their usual shenanigans when a woman named Minnie Ambrose asks them to travel to the Gorgon Asteroid and investigate a mysterious corporate science project gone awry. This DLC raises the level cap to 33, so players can earn new perks and flaws in addition to collecting three new science weapons. The Outer Worlds: Peril on Gorgon releases on PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC on September 9.





OPTIMIZED FOR SERIES X

In addition to the newly announced titles, Microsoft revealed that several Xbox One titles will be getting updates for the Xbox Series X this holiday season. Updates will improve resolution to native 4K output, increase frame rates up to 120 FPS, and improve overall performance. Games that are being optimized include Forza Horizon 4, Gears 5, Gears Tactics, Ori and the Will of the Wisps, and Sea of Thieves.

STALKER 2

While the PC-centric survival-horror Stalker franchise has been dormant for over a decade, it's coming back and arriving on console for the first time. Inside the open world of ruined Chernobyl, all kinds of nightmares and aberrations await, from hostile humans to gruesome mutants. GSC Game World is bringing the gritty post-nuclear survival scares to Xbox Series X and PC, but we don't have any dates or timelines in terms of release yet.

THE GUNK

Take to a strange planet filled with horrors and delights in this game from the creators of SteamWorld. This third-person action title features crafting, gathering, and survival mechanics – but your hunt for riches and prosperity takes an unexpected turn when the extraterrestrial environment bites back. Beware everything, but especially the cursed gunk parasite. Unravel the mysteries within the alien world when The Gunk arrives on Xbox Series X, Xbox One, and PC in 2021.

TELL ME WHY

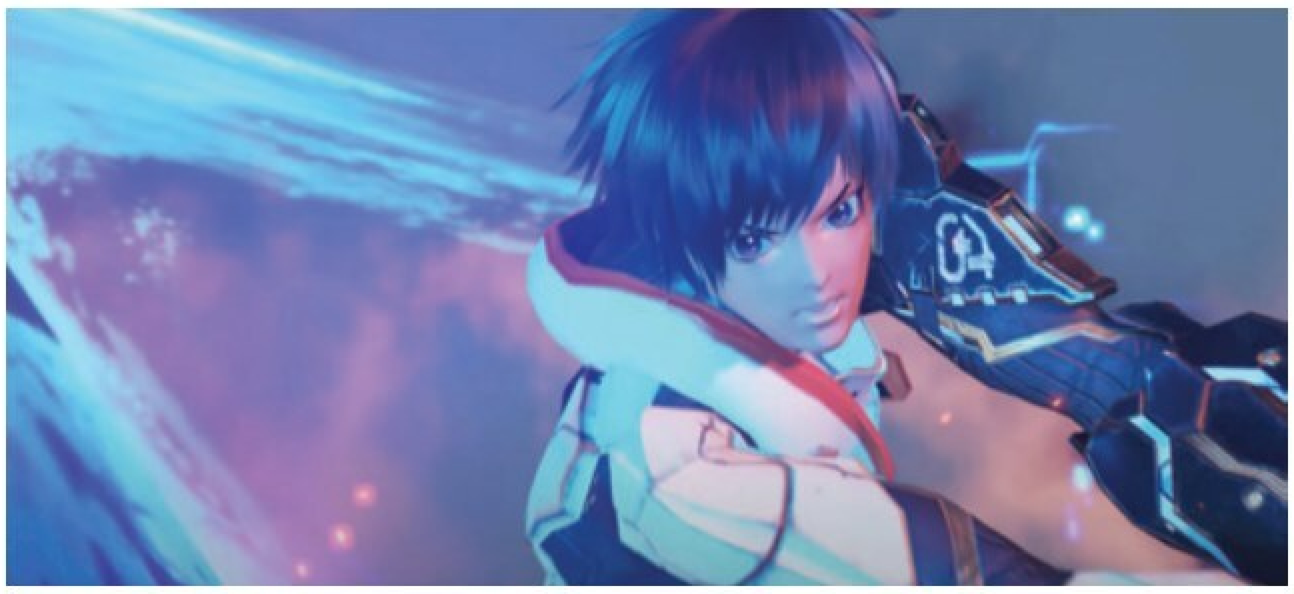
Dontnod has captivated us with its heartfelt Life is Strange series, and its next project looks to be just as emotionally charged. In Tell Me Why, you play as twins Tyler and Alyson, who share a supernatural bond and must confront painful memories from their past surrounding their mom. You see events from both siblings' perspectives, deciding who to believe. Following in the footsteps of distinct voices explored in Dontnod's games, Tell Me Why features a trans protagonist. The first of its planned three chapters launches on August 27 for Xbox One and PC.

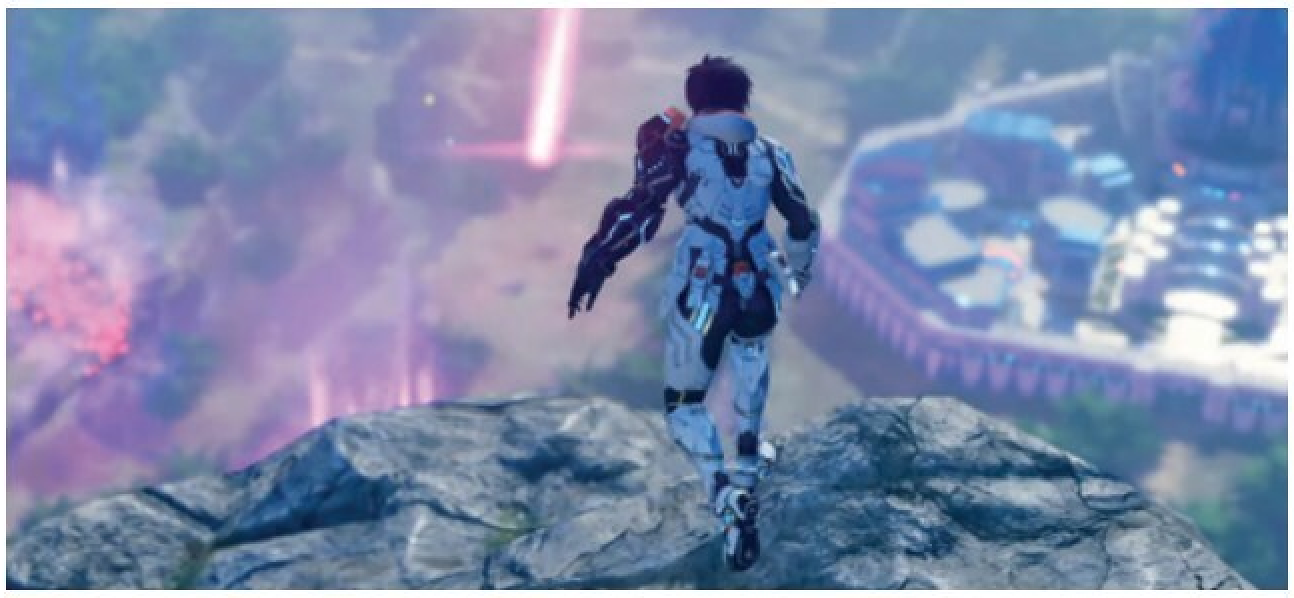
FORZA MOTORSPORT

Although the next Forza Motorsport is early in development, Microsoft and developer Turn 10 Studios are confident it will run at 60 frames per second and at a 4K resolution on Xbox Series X. This unnumbered sequel will also tap into next-generation lighting techniques to show surfaces of cars reflecting off of each other, as well as light and shadow interplay. The brief footage shown looked incredible, but no gameplay or release date details were given.

PRORATA
PRORATA

IRAKUZU
IRAKUZU



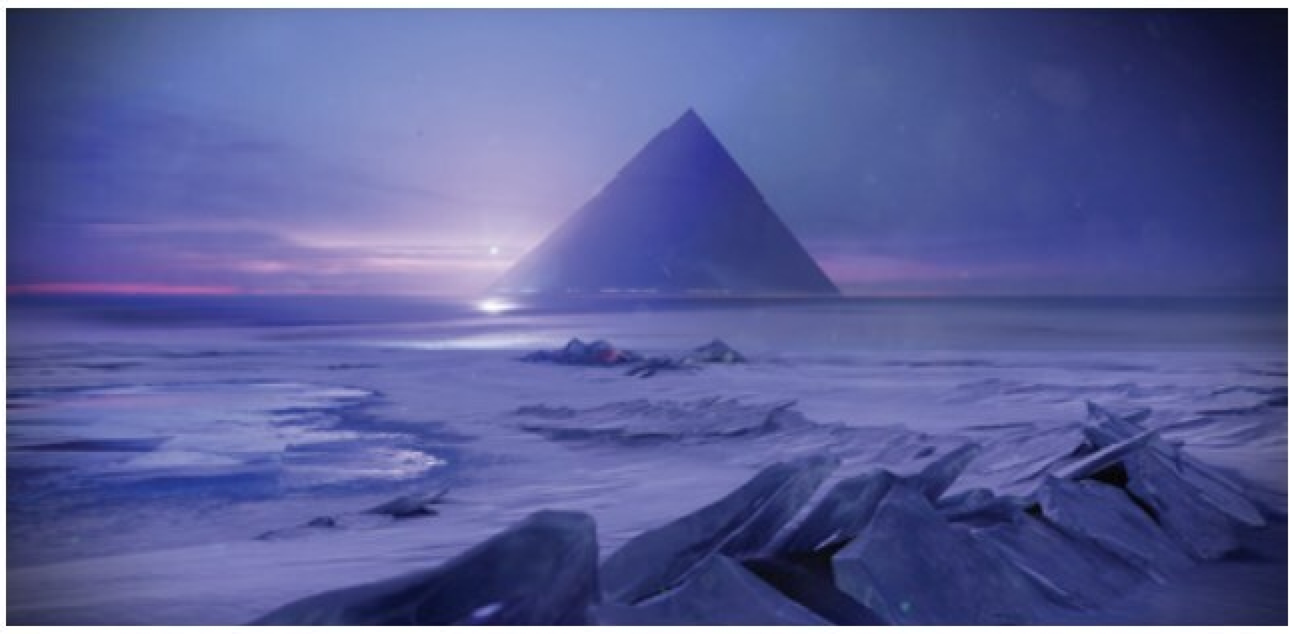


PHANTASY STAR ONLINE 2: NEW GENESIS

Mere months ago, close to eight years after its initial Japanese launch, Phantasy Star Online 2 finally made its way westward, but fans are already getting a new entry in the MMORPG series called New Genesis. The reveal trailer took us to a brand-new, expansive world, showing improved graphics, larger-than-life enemies, and flashy action moves. The game is set to launch globally in 2021 for Xbox Series X, Xbox One, and PC.

DESTINY 2: BEYOND LIGHT

One of a select number of non-first-party games featured during Microsoft's showcase, Destiny 2 has been announced for Xbox Game Pass this fall. Playing on Game Pass offers access to all existing expansions, including the soon-to-release Beyond Light coming this November. In addition, a new version of Destiny 2 is coming, optimized for Xbox Series X, and featuring 4K resolution running at 60 frames per second.



STATE OF DECAY 3

In Undead Labs' vision of the zombie apocalypse, nothing is sacred – not even deer! While the studio didn't show gameplay of the latest entry, a trailer set the tone, with an isolated survivor following a wounded wolf by its trail of blood. Unfortunately, by the time she arrives at the kill, it's already being chowed down on by an infected deer. Previous games had great moments and interesting systems, but lacked the polish they deserved. Hopefully, the third time's the charm.

EVERWILD

In Rare's next game, you explore a lush wilderness, help it heal, and form bonds with its giant beasts. The footage in the newest trailer again showed shots of people working together, implying cooperative play may be a central focus. We also saw beasts being used to pull down trees, and magic revealing secrets from what appears to be a long-lost society. Everwild is in development for Xbox Series X, Xbox One, and PC.

Hey, did you see the meteorite crash last night?

ECHO GENERATION

What if you took the small-town, kids-on-a-mission feel of *Stranger Things* and combined it with some turn-based RPG adventure? You'd have what we've seen so far of Echo Generation. If you're a fan of the old-school RPG, there's some Earthbound vibes here, too. Take on terrifying foes in classic combat, level up, complete quests, and more when Cococucumber's Echo Generation arrives on Xbox Series X, Xbox One, and PC in 2021.

WARHAMMER 40,000: DARKTIDE

Fatshark has had a few titles to perfect the four-player cooperation genre, a sort of Warhammer universe meets Left 4 Dead. However, unlike the Vermintide series, this new game is taking things into a vastly different sector of Warhammer lore, 40K. It's unknown what kinds of factions players will be able to tap into like the Tyranid, Ork, Eldar, and Chaos Marines, but Fatshark has offered plenty of options in the past. We'll be facing off against more than vicious rats when Darktide hits on Xbox Series X and PC in 2021.

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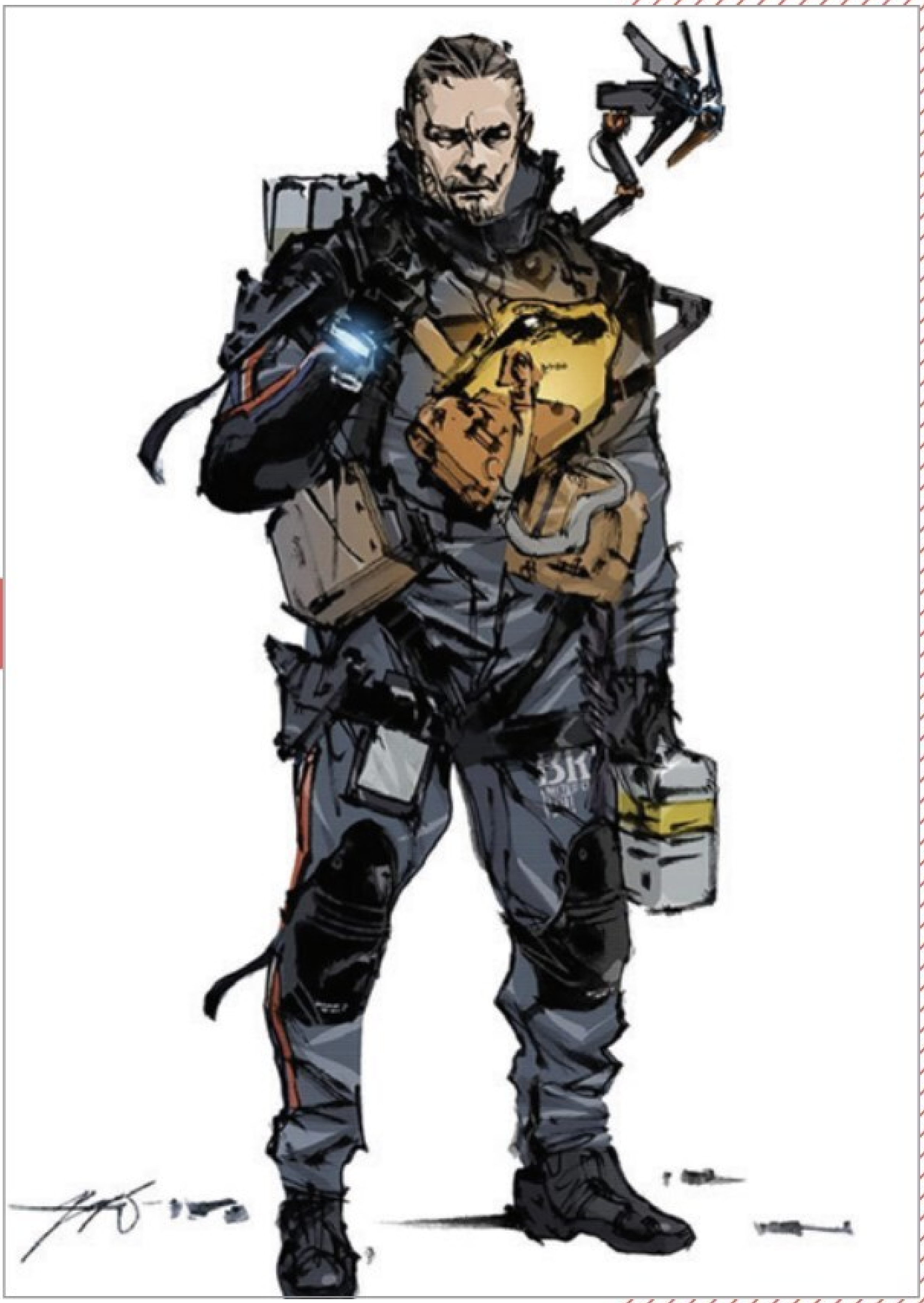
CREATING EXTINCTION

The artistic process behind Death Stranding

Death Stranding is a game unlike any other, and an important part of its unique atmosphere is the evocative (and sometimes haunting) visual design. Yoji Shinkawa is responsible for many of the game's most striking images; he served as Death Stranding's art director, though he is also known for his iconic designs in the Metal Gear Solid series. From memorable characters to impressive mecha, he has a distinct style that is immediately recognizable. To mark Death Stranding's recent release on PC, we asked Shinkawa some of our biggest questions about creating the visual identity of this strange-yet-compelling world.



interview by Joe Juba

How did the visual-design process for Death Stranding begin?
Well usually, there is the plot or the idea from Mr. [Hideo] Kojima, and I work to expand ideas off that through the background, story, and world image. For Death Stranding, the setting was based on an image of Iceland, with its great nature, so the background image for that was actually set.

Do you need to take any additional steps when working on a new property like Death Stranding, compared to making a sequel in a long-running series?
I would say sequels are easier to set the image at the start. New IPs always have this start-up difficulty of giving birth, so to speak, so it is a whole lot more difficult.

Do you remember the first thing you drew for Death Stranding?
I think it was Sam's outfit. Usually we have to create a sample game scene – you need the player character, after all – so we had to create Sam at quite an early stage. At that time, the outfit's image was not decided, so looking back, it totally looked different to what it looks in the game now.

With real people representing the characters in Death Stranding, was it easier to imagine their personalities and mannerisms?
I tend to rely on the actual characters' attractiveness when using real actors for our characters. So, when designing the outfit for that character, I would consider if it suits that actor – or not, too. But because we sometimes have a specific actor in mind for creating a character, it may be easier to think of the outfit first!

What design in Death Stranding required the most iterations to get right?
I would say the suit for Sam, and the design for the "Catcher" creature – especially the large ones. We went through a lot of trial and error, as it was more of a sci-fi look at the start. Sam's suit was closer to a futuristic space suit. The "Catcher" creature was also much stronger looking, a more normal-looking enemy monster. But, when we placed them in the game, the realism just wasn't there. It wasn't something the player could sympathize with, so we worked to make it look more realistic.

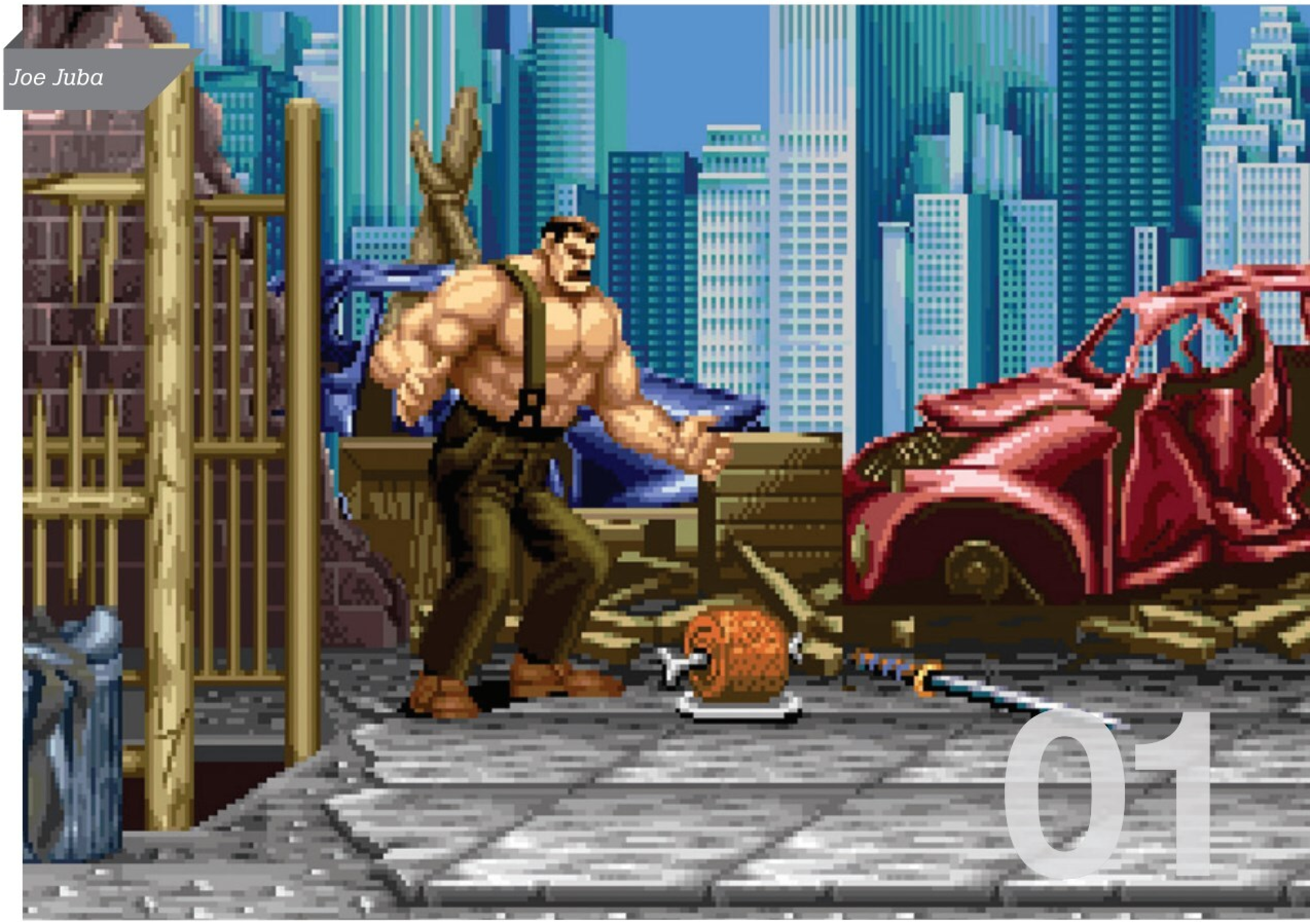
When it came to designing mechanical elements like robots and vehicles, how much did you consider how realistic or believable they might be in the world?
I usually start with functionality – creating the essential parts and, of course, thinking of the overall structure. But what's even more important is keeping in mind that it has to look good when the player interacts with it or controls it in the game. We consider if the action looks natural and whether it will move realistically as it's controlled. Those factors are much more important, so we always try to balance out the artistic design against those points.

How much do the capabilities of gaming hardware impact your design process for a project?
Of course, there may be times that we have to consider the limitation of the hardware and such, but we don't usually think about those restrictions. When you think about gameplay, and crucial functions that need to be considered in the game, I usually add or subtract from my designs based on them.

Were there any unused concepts or designs that you wish had made it into the final game?
Since Death Stranding is a new IP and project, there were so many things that needed to be thought about and worked on design-wise. I was really quite busy and don't think there were really any unused things!

HEALTH ITEMS

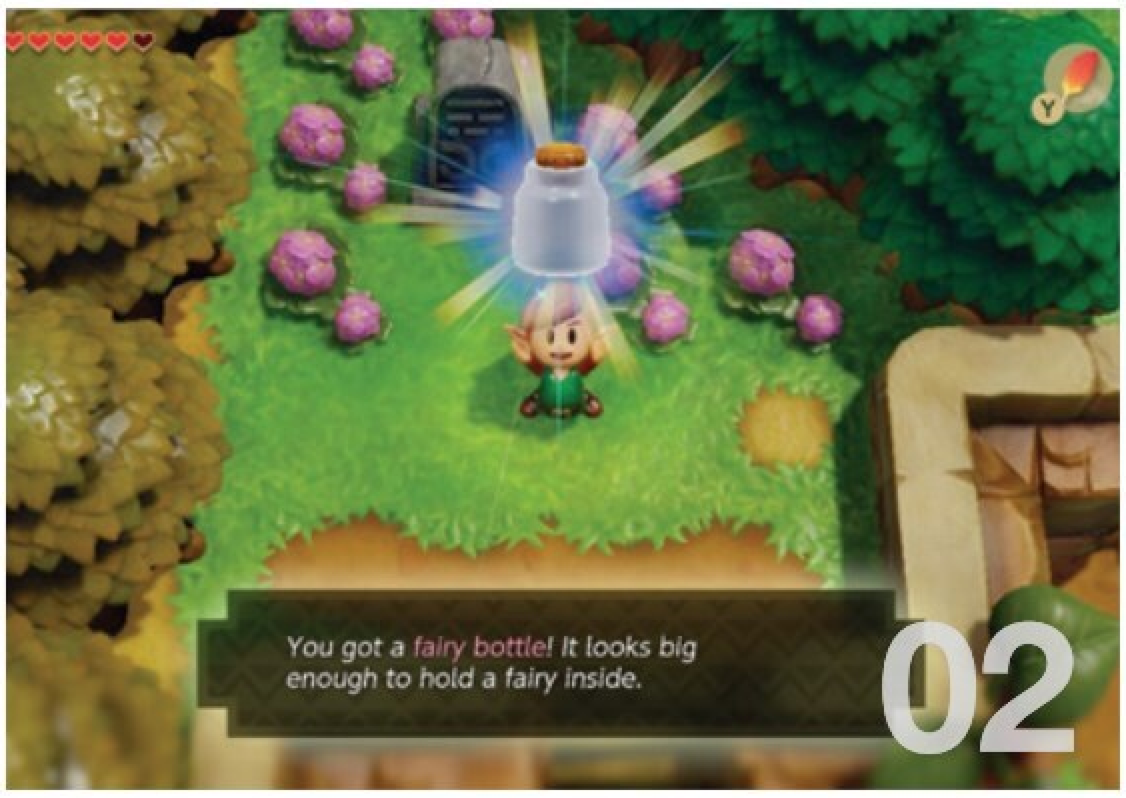
Joe Juba

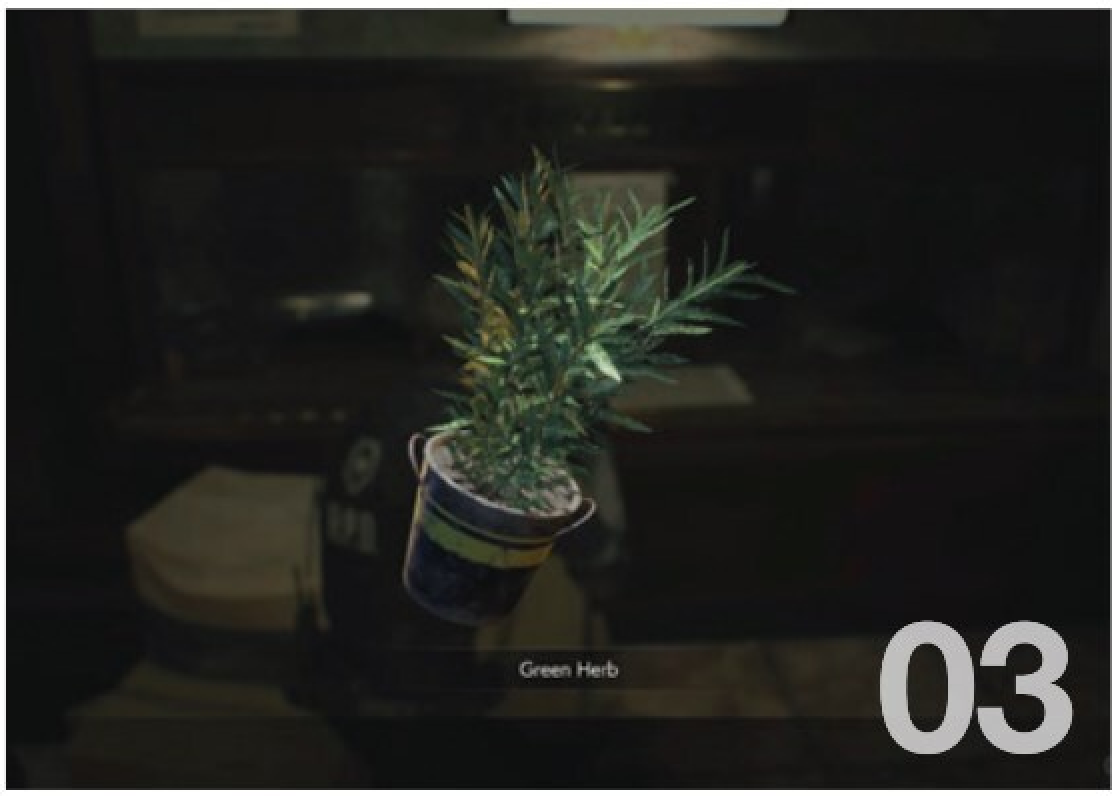


Meat

Final Fight series

You never know where you might find your next great meal. Break open a trash can. Punch through a stack of tires. In Final Fight, these acts of low-grade vandalism are your ticket to delicious, savory treasures like steak, chicken, and hamburgers. Don't think about the dangers of eating barbeque directly off the street, or how it got there in the first place – just dig in and enjoy the health boost!


You got a fairy bottle! It looks big enough to hold a fairy inside.



Fairy Bottle

The Legend of Zelda series

Fairies use their magic to restore Link's life, which frankly makes more sense as a healing tactic than grabbing disembodied hearts. Carrying fairies in bottles lets Link use their mystic favors at opportune moments, though you'd assume a great hero could maybe find more comfortable accommodations than a glass jar with a cork in it.

Green Herb

Resident Evil series

Conventional wisdom tells us that eating strange plants is a bad idea – and even worse if you mix strange plants together. However, recovering your health in Resident Evil games depends on this strategy, combining herbs for a variety of beneficial effects. The green herb is the most useful and versatile of the bunch, even though it's basically a glorified weed.

Estus Flask

Dark Souls series

At first, the concept of a recharging health potion might seem too generous for a game with Dark Souls' hardcore reputation. But your Estus flask hardly ensures your victory or survival; you must carefully conserve your sips in the hope that you can make it to the next bonfire. This lifeline may not be much, but it's a small comfort in an unforgiving world.

LIFE
MERYL
3/3
RATION
05

Rations

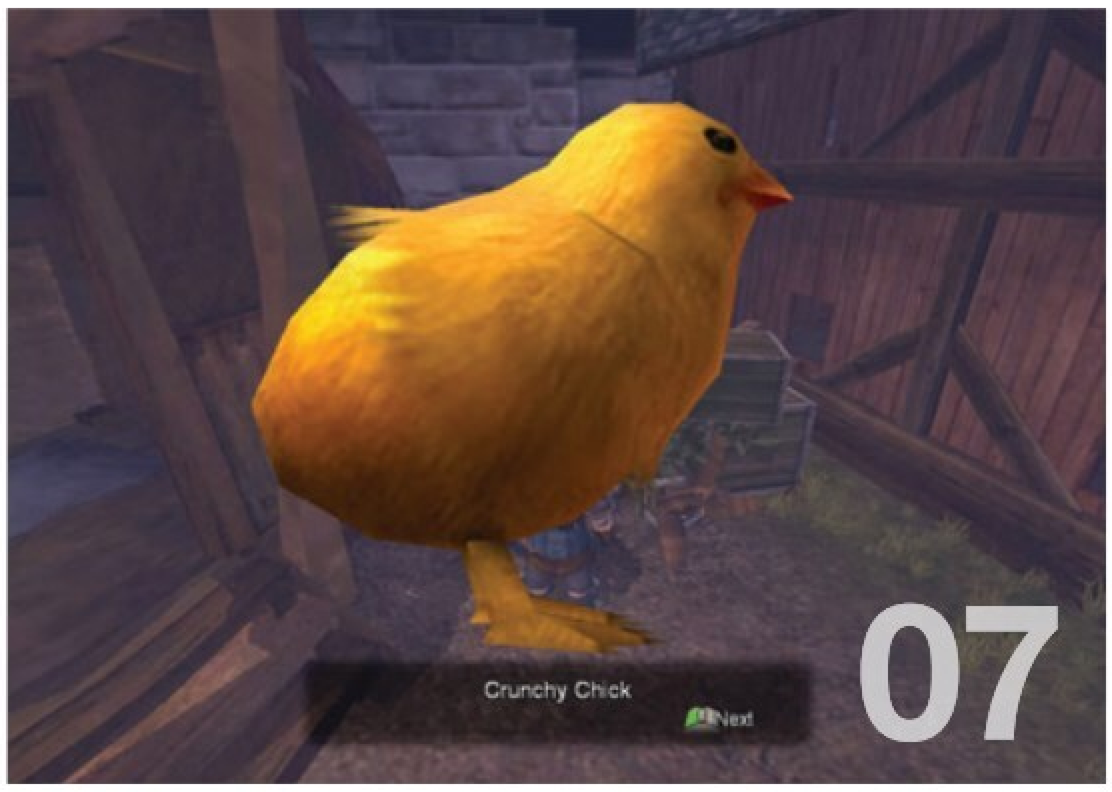
Metal Gear series

These military meals aren't exactly fine dining, but they're better than eating raw snakes. Rations also have the special property of restoring your health automatically when it hits zero. This means you're basically invincible if you have enough of these government-issued snacks handy – even if you're fighting nuclear-equipped bipedal robots.

Painkillers

Max Payne series

In gameplay terms, painkillers are simple: They refill Max's life meter. However, if you think about it, the pills aren't actually healing him. They help Max ignore pain, but they don't do anything about the mental or physical injuries causing it. This may help you as a player finish the game, but it certainly leaves Max worse off in the end.



Crunchy Chick

Fable series

Some foods are healthier than others, but few literally make you more evil when you eat them. That's the unique property of Fable's crunchy chicks. You might say, "I'm too good to eat adorable baby chickens," but when a Demon Door blocking a cool weapon demands an act of great evil, even the most noble heroes find themselves picking feathers out of their teeth.

People

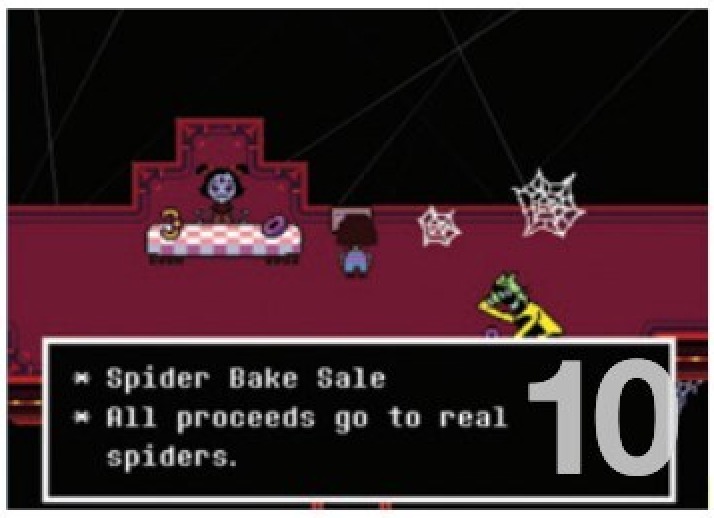
Rampage

In most games, the loss of human life is a bad thing. In Rampage, it keeps you going. After smashing buildings and fighting the military, nothing reenergizes you like chowing down on a hapless person plucked from an open window. Plus, since you got transformed into horrible mutant beast, it doesn't technically count as cannibalism!

Coffee Creamer

Dead Rising

Everyone knows that a tall glass of crisp, refreshing coffee creamer can help you feel better when you're under the weather. Frank goes even further, chugging gallons of this stuff while hacking through mobs of shambling zombies. Sure, this "coffee creamer" may just be mislabeled chocolate milk, but drinking that much without puking is impressive either way.


* Spider Bake Sale
* All proceeds go to real spiders.

Spider Donut

Undertale

This tasty treat is a hit at spider bake sales! The name may sound gross, but don't get confused: It is (probably) not a spider-flavored donut, which would be disgusting. This is simply a donut made by spiders, sold by spiders, and hand-delivered by spiders. Nothing revolting or weird about it. ◆

THE LAST OF US PART II

Even if you haven't played Naughty Dog's recent post-apocalyptic survival game, you're probably aware of some of its dark themes and controversial topics. While the game has received wide critical praise, it's also been at the center of several online controversies. We talked with creative director Neil Druckmann and narrative lead Halley Gross to find out what it was like to build this massive game and how they felt about its reception. **Spoiler warning!**

by Ben Reeves and Alex Stadnik

In The Last of Us Part II, you really put your characters through the wringer. How do you balance making a character likable while making them do stuff you know players won't like?
Druckmann: I don't know if it's about likable. It's more like, "Is their motivation consistent?" Are we just trying to force things for plot, or are we doing something cool? Usually, if we say that's inconsistent for the character, we'll throw those ideas out or discuss if we need to change the character, so it becomes less about, "Are they likable?" versus "Do we buy their motivation?"

Okay, but on some level you wanted people to like Abby, right?
D: I guess maybe likable is the wrong word. Not to get into semantics. But, are you intrigued? Are you buying into who Abby is? Because with "likable" you might just say she can't do anything wrong to make sure you like her. That's not what makes me intrigued by someone. Often I'll read a book or watch a movie where it's not about a moral person; I wouldn't want this person around me. Walter White [from *Breaking Bad*] is a great example. I guess he is "likable" in that I'm intrigued, and I want to see what happens next with him, but I don't think he's good. I don't know if we need to say that Ellie is good or Abby is good. It's just, do you understand them? Do you understand their motivation and why they're making the kinds of choices they do?

The scene where Abby meets Yara and Lev was part of a demo you showed off early in development, which in retrospect seems crazy because you kept the rest of Abby's journey so secretive. Can you speak to why you choose to show that particular scene off so early?
D: To me, marketing is part of your storytelling, because you have to show something. You can't show nothing ... As a fan, I think back to Metal Gear Solid and Metal Gear Solid 2 specifically, and I liked being misled. I like seeing stuff out of context and trying to think, "How does this fit? Who are these characters? Who's coming back and who's not coming back for a sequel?"

You went to the extreme in some cases, even recording extra lines for Joel that were used deceptively in the marketing. Did you feel like you were lying to players? Is there a limit to that kind of thing?
D: It's white lies. I'm sure there are limits. For example, I can think of movies that advertised certain actors, and then they're only in it for five minutes. For us, we knew Joel was in the game, and Joel's presence is felt throughout the whole game, so that's why it felt okay to mislead you – to protect his death. At the same time, it felt important to not show off fake Joel gameplay in Seattle … For us, it comes from the motivation of trying as much as we can to give you some snippets of what the story is about to give you tone, but protect the story.

Can you speak about subverting expectations? The Last of Us Part II does that a lot, even in gameplay moments like when you get attacked at a workbench.
D: That speaks to the culture we have at Naughty Dog, which is anyone can pitch ideas, whether they're gameplay or narrative, or sometimes even tech. That idea didn't come from the writing team. That came from design, and I'm honestly not sure who had the initial idea, but at some point, someone showed it to me and I was like, "That's awesome!"

Some people have problems with dog violence. Did you ever consider removing dogs from the game?
D: Yes, we had those conversations. I remember having a pretty intense conversation with someone about how we were writing all these accessibility features and they said, “You know, maybe we should remove dog violence. That should be an accessibility feature.” And my stance was, “We can’t.” Sure, it might be past their comfort level, but it’s not like they can’t play through that. Ultimately the game can’t shy away from the violence these characters are committing. We have to lean into that, because that’s what the story’s about.

You make some serious social commentary in the game, but some of that wasn’t received well. Were you surprised by any of the hateful fan feedback?
D: We knew the game was not for everybody. We knew we were making a game that’s harder to play – not in difficulty but in content – than the first game … In this game, almost from the get-go, your characters start to make morally dubious decisions that not everyone’s on board with, so from that standpoint, we knew the game would be divisive. And we knew it’d be divisive because we’re killing a fan favorite right off the bat. What we didn’t know, and I couldn’t have foreseen is that it would turn into this – I’m gonna get in trouble for this – but this Gamergate-esque cultural war.

What is one thing you wish you could have included in the game that didn’t make the final cut?
Gross: It would have been nice to see Scar Island when it was not a warzone. There was a time when we had five days instead of three for both girls, and Ellie went to Scar Island as well, but she did it before the assault on the island, and you got to see their domestic life, essentially like how you see Abby go through the stadium or Ellie go through Jackson. You were able to witness their sweet home domestic life, you know taking care of family members and raising animals and living their lives, but it didn’t progress Ellie’s story.

What about mechanically? Did you cut any gameplay systems?
G: There was a period where Dina was gonna be very good at technology, and she was going to be able to crack things or make stuff like bombs.

D: There was also an early version of the game where Ellie had a dog, and there were all these dog mechanics like the dog could fit under fences and go get something for you and bring it back. That never went very far, but we had some prototypes. Then there was a whole mechanic of holding people up and getting information, Metal Gear Solid V style. There were different versions of maps and how you could use the map, and the map would draw itself as you went through the world. We had more open-world ideas for this game.

How did the ending of the game change throughout development?
G: When I signed on, a lot of it was very similar. We did a lot of iterations on what that last act looked like, but the final beat was that Ellie would kill Abby. And about halfway through production, we changed tack and had Ellie let go at the last second to preserve, or to elucidate, that some little part of the old Ellie – the Ellie that was impacted by Joel and who Joel was – still exists inside of this character who has been overtaken by her quest for revenge.

D: The way we work is that someone will pitch an idea, and no matter how crazy it is we’ll say, “Let’s play it through. If this person lives, what does that mean? What are the domino effects that propagate throughout the whole story?” Initially, I was like, “That feels wrong thematically for what we’re after.” But at the end of the day, it felt more honest for the character, and therefore the theme of what we were trying to say shifted a little. But our top priority is always: Are we honest to the character?

Is Ellie in a good place at the end? Is she happy now?
G: I think she’s where Abby starts the game. Sort of lost, but thinking, “I know that didn’t work for me. That didn’t help, so what else might I do in a more productive way?”

D: The ending was originally much darker for Ellie when she killed Abby because it ended with her being truly lost. In the version we ended up going with she retains more of her humanity, and from our perspective, it’s a more hopeful ending. She’s on a path of redemption.

We noticed Ellie picks at her fingers during the game, which seems like foreshadowing because, in the end, she loses a couple fingers. Can you speak to that symbolism?
D: Pretty early on, we had the idea that Joel would gift her this guitar, and by the end of the game she wouldn’t be able to play it. There were all sorts of different versions of how she lost her fingers, but in almost every version, she lost then in some horrible way. We work so hard to create parallel storylines and symbolism and things that contradict each other, but recently I saw someone made this connection which I didn’t even think about. Throughout the story, you see Ellie’s dealing with her PTSD and she has these shakes with her hand, and then when she shows up at the farm, even though she’s missing her fingers, her hand is still. That speaks to where she’s at. Despite everything she’s gone through, there’s been some exorcism of these demons.

We’re not necessarily asking if there’s going to be more games, but do you feel that this story is now full circle? Do you feel in a more complete place than after the first one?
D: I guess I could say a couple of different things. The first game was always meant to be this complete statement … The approach for this game was the same: “I don’t know if we’re ever going to make another Last of Us, so if we never make another one this should stand as a final statement.” Having said that, you can’t help but start thinking about other stories with the same characters, different characters, or in other parts of the world.

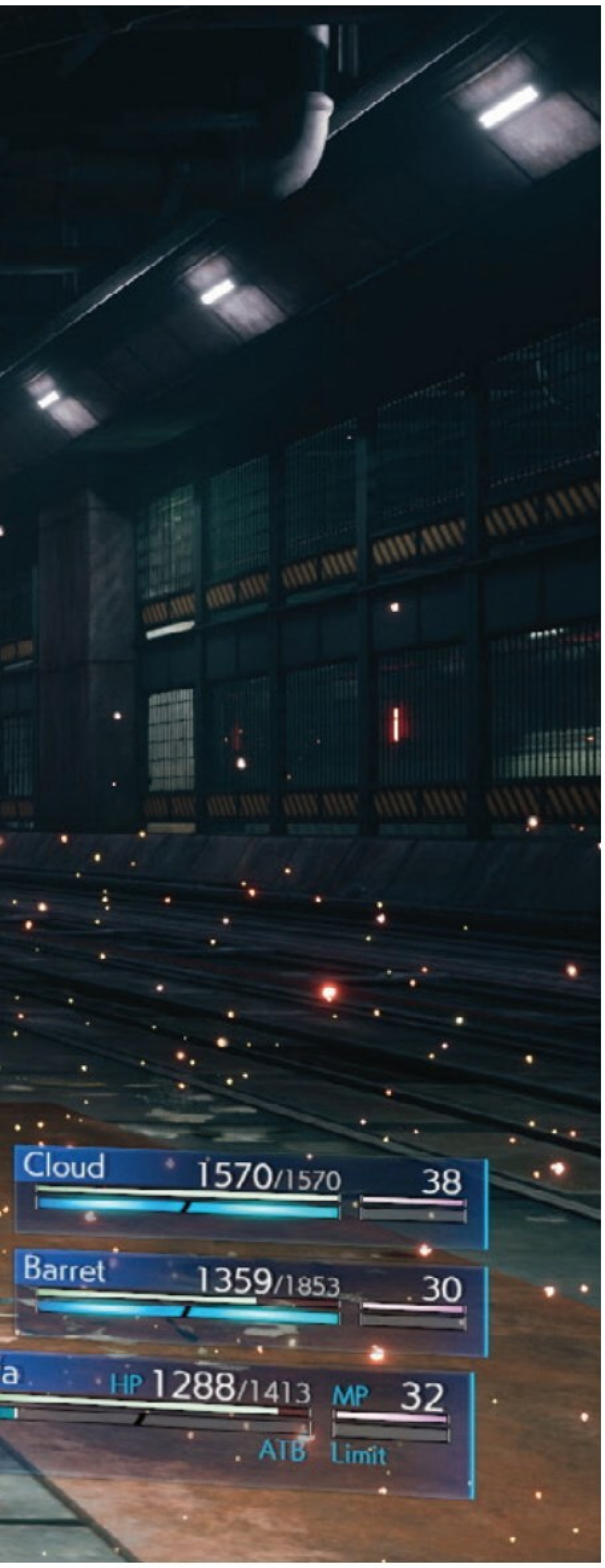
FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE

Fan expectations for Final Fantasy VII Remake were extremely high, and the team at Square Enix delivered. But how did they do it? How does the game accomplish the seemingly impossible feat of satisfying old fans while bringing in new ones? What ideas didn't make the cut? And what was up with that ending? We got some answers to these questions and more from two key figures on the Final Fantasy VII Remake development team: producer Yoshinori Kitase and co-director Naoki Hamaguchi. *by Joe Juba*

How did you decide which parts of the original game would get new or expanded content in the remake?
Hamaguchi: The decision about which parts of the original game would be carried forward into Final Fantasy VII Remake was largely entrusted to the creativity of the game designers responsible for in-game locations. The direction we gave to the game designers was: "When designing the game, always expand upon elements of the original." Due in part to the fact that this is a remake of Final Fantasy VII, most of the members of the development team had been fans of the original. I think we could say that each of them had their own personal thoughts and perceptions when it came to Final Fantasy VII, and they drew on that to shape this title. For example, we hadn't originally planned to include the squats in Wall Market, but the on-site game creators were passionate about it, saying, "We need to have this because it's definitely going to be something that players are looking forward to," and that's how it came to be a reality.

Sephiroth plays a role much earlier in this new version of the story. Were you worried that introducing him so soon would make his actions later less menacing?
Kitase: The original story was in the form of a mystery, and of course back then, nobody knew going in about what was to come. The production reflected this, with the conscious decision to avoid showing the looming threat that is Sephiroth until the latter half of the story, thereby heightening the feeling of dread in a fashion, similar to the movie *Jaws*.

This time, however, we knew that many fans were already familiar with Sephiroth. Therefore, we determined that taking the same approach in production wouldn't be fitting. Instead, in Final Fantasy VII



Remake, we wanted to make it clear that his presence is one that dominates throughout the series as a foil directly in opposition to the main character, and that led to us taking this approach.

The summons in Final Fantasy VII Remake are cool, but they can't be used in every battle. Why was it important to limit players' access to them?

H: Coolness is a trait that people look for in the summons that appear in Final Fantasy, so I'm glad if you felt that way (laughs). Let's see, there's actually a clear reasoning behind our decision to prevent players from being able to use them freely in any and all battles, which was how it was in the original. This isn't limited to summons, but whenever there's a mechanic that can be used at any time, we have to ensure that the battle system has been properly designed to incorporate pros and cons that accompany its usage. Otherwise, that mechanic can become a sure-fire method for victory every time, and battles could end up becoming a repetitive and monotonous task.

When we incorporated summons into the battle design, we also prioritized creating an experience that felt particularly exciting and special. Rather than incorporating summons as a strategic element to be used at any time during battle, we thought that it would feel more memorable and exhilarating if they could be experienced as a so-called "fever time," where a summon would stay and help the player during the entire time it was there. Based on this decision, we narrowed down the conditions required for summoning while also reducing the MP consumption to zero. As a result, I think we were able to incorporate summons into the battle system in a well-balanced manner.

The reimagined version of Wall Market is one of the highlights of Final Fantasy VII Remake. What did you see as the essence of this area that you wanted to convey to players?

H: Just like the original title, I believe the essence of Wall Market is its depiction as an entertainment district for grown-ups. That being said, there is a clear difference in how we presented these elements, to be suitable for the modern era.

With that in mind, we tried to look into how we could showcase this area as an entertainment district suitable for people from a wide range of cultures and age, while also dialing back on the "adult" aspect of it. We decided we wanted to make the Honeybee Inn a dazzling dance production in the vein of Moulin Rouge, the Corneo Coliseum an exciting underground battle arena that grown-ups could go crazy, and Madam M's massage parlor would have a tantalizing, alluring aspect; and that's how we arrived at the reimagined Wall Market. Of course, we made sure to incorporate the fundamental essence of the original Wall Market, so I believe we were able to make it a familiar yet new area, rather than it being a complete departure from the source material.

Many players were nervous about how the scenes with Cloud at the Honeybee Inn would be handled, but the remake pulls them off well. What was the hardest part of adapting that sequence?

H: We had already determined that Wall Market as a whole, including the Honeybee Inn, would be updated significantly from the original game, and this was an area co-director Motomu Toriyama put so much of his heart and soul into. I think that passion also came from the fact that Mr. Toriyama himself was the person handling the Wall Market in the original game, too (laughs).

"If we're going to change it, we might as well make it highly entertaining" – that was the directive, and so we referenced things like the French Moulin Rouge and Japanese burlesques, so that the Honeybee Inn would include this dance battle to show each other up. With these references in mind, we were given the animations for Cloud and Andrea's dance sequence and were tasked with incorporating that into the game … It was such a dynamic dance scene, so rather than muddling the screen with two-dimensional UI elements, we went with a three-dimensional UI that is integrated into the sequence; we worked really hard to prioritize the integration of the dance scene with this integrated UI.

Can you give an example of something – a feature, character, location, etc. – that you wanted to include in the remake but couldn't fit in?

H: This might be very specific, but here goes … Many of the minigames in FFVII Remake pay homage to the source material, but there was one minigame that we wanted to pay homage to and implement, but could not, and only a trace of it remains (laughs).

Do you remember there was a basketball minigame in the Gold Saucer from the original game? Well, we had prepared a basketball hoop on the way to Jessie's parents' home in Sector 7, but I decided it would not be very fitting at all to have a minigame where you hear the sounds of a basketball echoing through the quiet hours of the night. That being said, we did want to pay some kind of tribute, so you see just a basketball left there, and it just rolls around.

The final chapter implies that the story will now start branching out in significantly different directions compared to the original Final Fantasy VII. Without spoiling too much about the ending, is that an accurate interpretation of those events?

K: My providing any sort of answer here will take away the fun from what is going to come, so I will have to refrain from saying anything.

Right now, fans around the world are thinking about various theories. That is exactly what I was hoping people would do. I would encourage everyone to stretch their imagination as you wait, until we are able to bring you the next installment. ◆

STAYING FIT WHILE LOCKING DOWN

by Game Informer Staff

1 Ring Fit Adventure

The easiest way to stay fit is to find a fun workout, and Nintendo's Ring Fit Adventure makes it easy to enjoy sweating. As you explore more than 100 levels on a quest to defeat a bodybuilding dragon, you perform a series of workouts using an elastic ring. Not only can you make your workouts as short or long as you like, but you can customize the types of activities you prefer and set the number of reps you want to complete. As you race to defeat your dragon, not only do you level up, but you also get fitter! Thanks, video games!

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■■□

$79.99 | ringfitadventure.nintendo.com

2 Fitbit Versa 2

For tech-savvy enthusiasts looking to stay in shape while stuck at home, the Versa 2 is a stellar assistant. Beyond being able to customize from a variety of slick clock faces, the smartwatch features Amazon Alexa and Spotify support, message and calendar notifications, tap-and-pay wallet support, and an array of apps. However, the real benefit comes with the device's robust approach to fitness and wellness tracking, from expected features like heart rate and steps taken to more complex tools like dynamic workouts, guided breathing tools, and some especially impressive tech for sleep tracking. This is a smart wearable that ticks a lot of boxes and walks the fine line between sleek aesthetic and useful health tool.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

$199 | fitbit.com

12
58
14,291
79
1,603
WED 28

2

3 Polar H10 Heart Rate Sensor

Whether you're an Apple Watch user obsessed with closing your rings or just someone hoping to track your fitness sessions, the Polar H10 Heart Rate Sensor is an excellent addition. The chest-strap design provides accurate readings from your heart rate and can pair with your GoPro camera to overlay data onto your videos. Not only that, but the companion Polar Beat app lets you record your workouts and provides accurate statistics, charts, and even an analysis of your session.

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■■□

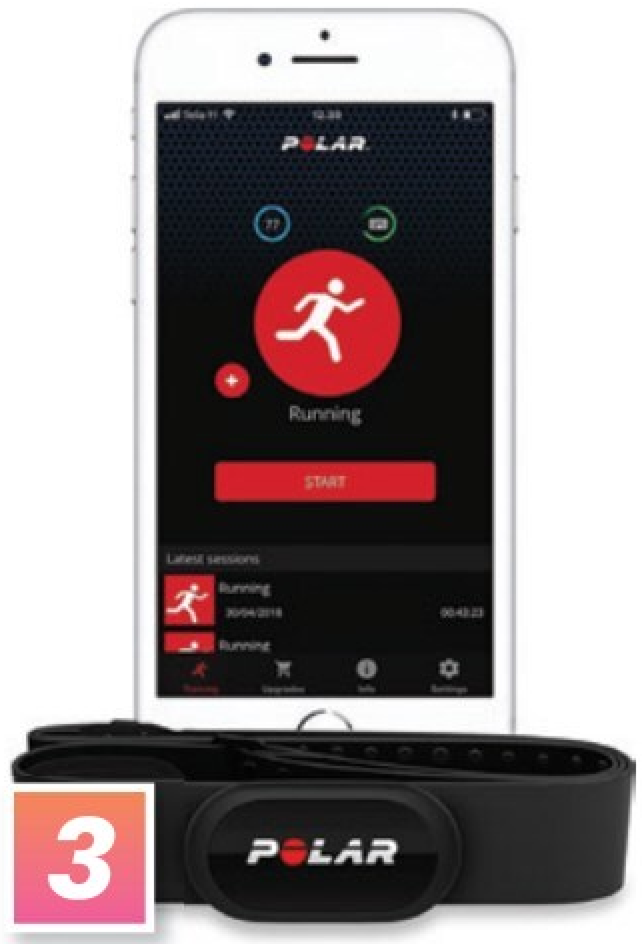
$89.95 | polar.com

4 Stealth Plankster

Planks are among the most boring workouts, but since they're so beneficial, it's wise to sneak them into your routine in some way. Stealth's line of plank equipment rotates and twists smoothly, requiring you to maintain your balance as you use the companion app to play games and complete challenges. The free app comes with two rudimentary minigames – a target shooter and a gliding challenge – with a premium subscription unlocking 10 additional minigames. The equipment features a recessed slot to keep your phone from sliding around, and arm pads for added comfort. The arm pads get a little slippery if you begin to sweat, but that doesn't stop the Plankster from delivering a solid core workout after just a few minutes of gameplay.

AVERAGE ■■■■■■■□□□

$149; $24.99/year for premium app access
stealthcoreproducts.com

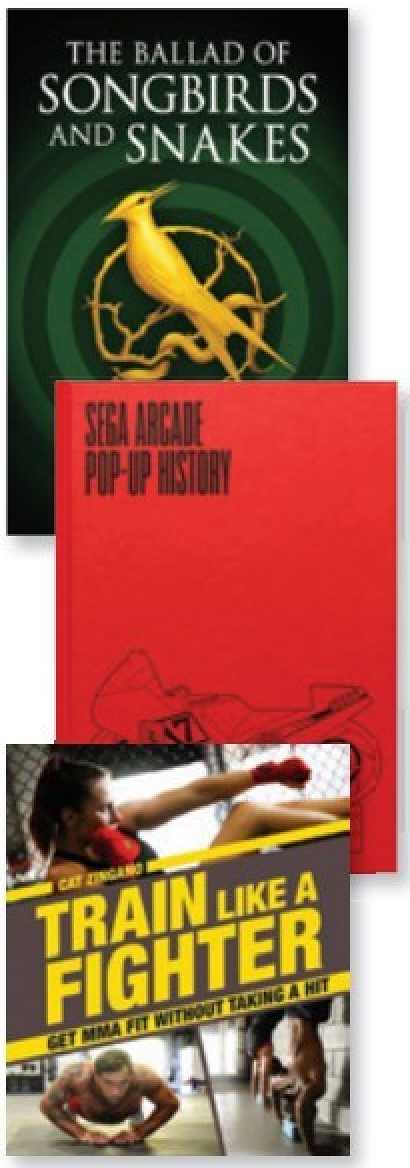


3

STEALTH
PLANKSTER

4

Media Shelf


THE BALLAD OF SONGBIRDS AND SNAKES
SEGA ARCADE POP-UP HISTORY
CAT ZINGANO
TRAIN LIKE A FIGHTER
GET MMA FIT WITHOUT TAKING A HIT

THE BALLAD OF SONGBIRDS AND SNAKES BY SUZANNE COLLINS

Return to the world of the Hunger Games with Suzanne Collins' prequel novel. Snow will eventually be the villain to heroine Katniss Everdeen, but in his youth, we see the choices, friendships, and love affair that shaped him into such a despicable figure.

$27.99
suzannecollinsbooks.com

SEGA ARCADE POP UP HISTORY

This clever pop-up book pays tribute to six of Sega's classic arcade cabinets: Hang-On, Space Harrier, Out Run, After Burner, Thunder Blade, and Power Drift. In addition to the dazzling paper sculptures, this brilliant coffee-table book includes a detailed history of Sega's formative years.

$42.00
readonlymemory.vg/shop

TRAIN LIKE A FIGHTER: GET MMA FIT WITHOUT TAKING A HIT BY CAT ZINGANO

Former UFC title contender Cat Zingano lays out training techniques she and fellow pro MMA fighters use without having to worry about getting hit in the face. The 60-plus, easy-to-follow exercises are challenging, but still approachable for the non-professional athletes among us.

$19.99
penguinrandomhouse.com

BACK INTO ACTION

Track down these retro revivals of some of the most celebrated action-figure lines ever made

by Matt Miller

1

TMNT TURTLES IN TIME

It's the summer of 1991, and the arcade is packed. A big part of the crowd is gathered around the new Ninja Turtles game, popping in tokens. For many, Turtles in Time was the height of the scrolling beat 'em up arcade era, and now you can snag these 7-inch scale figures to commemorate the memory, built to emulate the pixelated gaming style of that memorable title. Sturdy, taut joints allow for a range of improbable display positions that recall the acrobatic fighting style of the heroes in a half-shell, and as NECA has shown time and again, the detailing and color selections are spot on. Enjoy your hoverboard rides.

$24.99 | necaonline.com

2

TRANSFORMERS: GENERATIONS EARTHRISE SKY LYNX

In the world of the robots in disguise, few characters from the original 1980s cartoon had the sheer cool factor of the powerful Sky Lynx – perhaps because the whole concept was so over-the-top. A giant bird that combined with a roaring cat to transform into a shuttle transport? Yes, please! At 11 inches, the new revival of the classic figure is a gorgeous and hefty collectible with tons of poseability, and a unique transformation sequence that can be tweaked into five distinct alternate modes. High play value, and equally high display potential make this noble flyer a standout.

$79.99 | hasbro.com

3

G.I. JOE CLASSIFIED SERIES

If your toy tastes veer toward America's daring, highly trained mission force, then the new 6-inch scale G.I. Joe line is ready to unload some freedom on your shelf. Following in the successful formula established in similarly sized Star Wars and Marvel Hasbro lines, G.I. Joe Classified offers detailed sculpts, high articulation, and plentiful accessories to outfit your soldiers. Do you load up on heroic warriors like Snake Eyes and Scarlett, or villainous masterminds like Cobra Commander or Destro? That's on your conscience.

$19.99 | hasbro.com

4

MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE ORIGINS HE-MAN AND SKELETOR

Mattel is going all in on nostalgia for its renewal of He-Man and the rest of the Masters of the Universe. The 5.5-inch figures feature similar muscle-bound silhouettes to the original line of toys that filled toy chests for millions of '80s kids, and the packaging is a straight-up throwback to the lava-explosion bombast of the vintage blister packs. But this new line isn't quite as old-fashioned as it appears at first glance, boasting new sculpts, increased joint movement, and some attractive detailing. ◆

$14.99 | mattel.com

TWO-PLAYER BOARD GAMES FOR A LOCKED-DOWN LIFE

by Matt Miller

If you've been spending a lot of time at home with a partner or roommate, it might be worth finding a new game to share. While plenty of tabletop games support two-player options, these recent and excellent releases are built from the ground up for a pair of gamers to enjoy together.

THE FOX IN THE FOREST DUET

Many cooperative games are built for big groups and feature large and involved set-ups, but Fox in the Forest Duet is a lovely and inexpensive two-player option that offers an enjoyable and easy-to-learn challenge focused on working together with limited information.

Over three hands, this trick-taking card game provides a fascinating experiment in non-verbal communication. The goal is to walk back and forth along a forested path, collecting red gems that appear at each space. Players take turns revealing cards from their hand to push and pull the play token in opposing directions along the path, trying to avoid walking beyond the edge of the board. Each player must try to play a card that either purposefully trumps or loses the trick, which determines which way the token will move. Special powers on several of the beautifully illustrated cards add an additional tactical layer. Of course, along the way, you can only let the cards do the talking – no verbal coordination is allowed.

Simple mechanics and a quiet, nature-focused setting lend this casual cooperative affair a feeling of breezy fun. It's an especially great fit for an experienced player alongside a relatively casual partner, demanding that the two of you sync up your plays.

$15.00 | renegadegamestudios.com

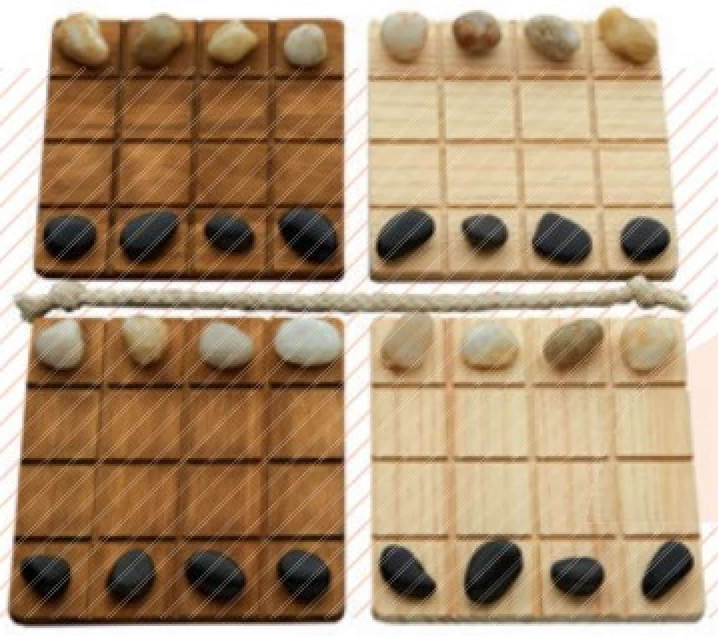
COSMIC ENCOUNTER DUEL

The original Cosmic Encounter is a classic of the early board-gaming scene, spawning numerous new editions and revisions over the years. The new Cosmic Encounter Duel takes that larger multiplayer experience and retrofits everything for a tense two-person competition. Players control one of over two-dozen unique alien species, each of which breaks the standard rules of play in a unique way. You and your opponent are both vying to join the Cosmic Citizenship Council, but there's only space for one of you; the first to control five newly discovered planets wins the slot.

Players move their ships across the vastness of space, discovering new worlds, confronting surprising outer-space events, and gradually building up forces and allies to win the day. A clever dueling mechanic demands that each player secretly selects numbers of ships and tactics before revealing a plan of attack and resolving the throwdown.

The science-fiction theming and art is wonderfully imagined, the playtimes are under an hour, and the tense one-versus-one exchanges are great fun, doing honor to this venerable tabletop franchise.

$39.95 | fantasyflightgames.com



SHOBU

Lovers of abstract strategy games like chess, go, or Othello should pause to consider the intriguing potential of Shobu, an especially striking new two-player game that feels like it's been unearthed from some long-forgotten treasure hoard.

Four small wooden boards each house a set of white and black smooth-tumbled stones. On your turn, move one of your stones one or two spaces in any direction. Then, move any one other stone on one of the boards of the opposite color, where it must shift in the same direction and number of spaces. The goal is to knock all your opponent's stones off of any one board to win.

Shobu is one of those fascinating games that takes only moments to pick up, but promises a rich spatial challenge with nearly endless replayability. Inevitably, the early part of each session sees many stones knocked away on both sides, until the two opponents have just a few viable pieces left on each board, and the real match begins in earnest. With a Zen-like aesthetic and gorgeous components, it's a great fit for two deep thinkers ready to get lost in a novel matching of wits.

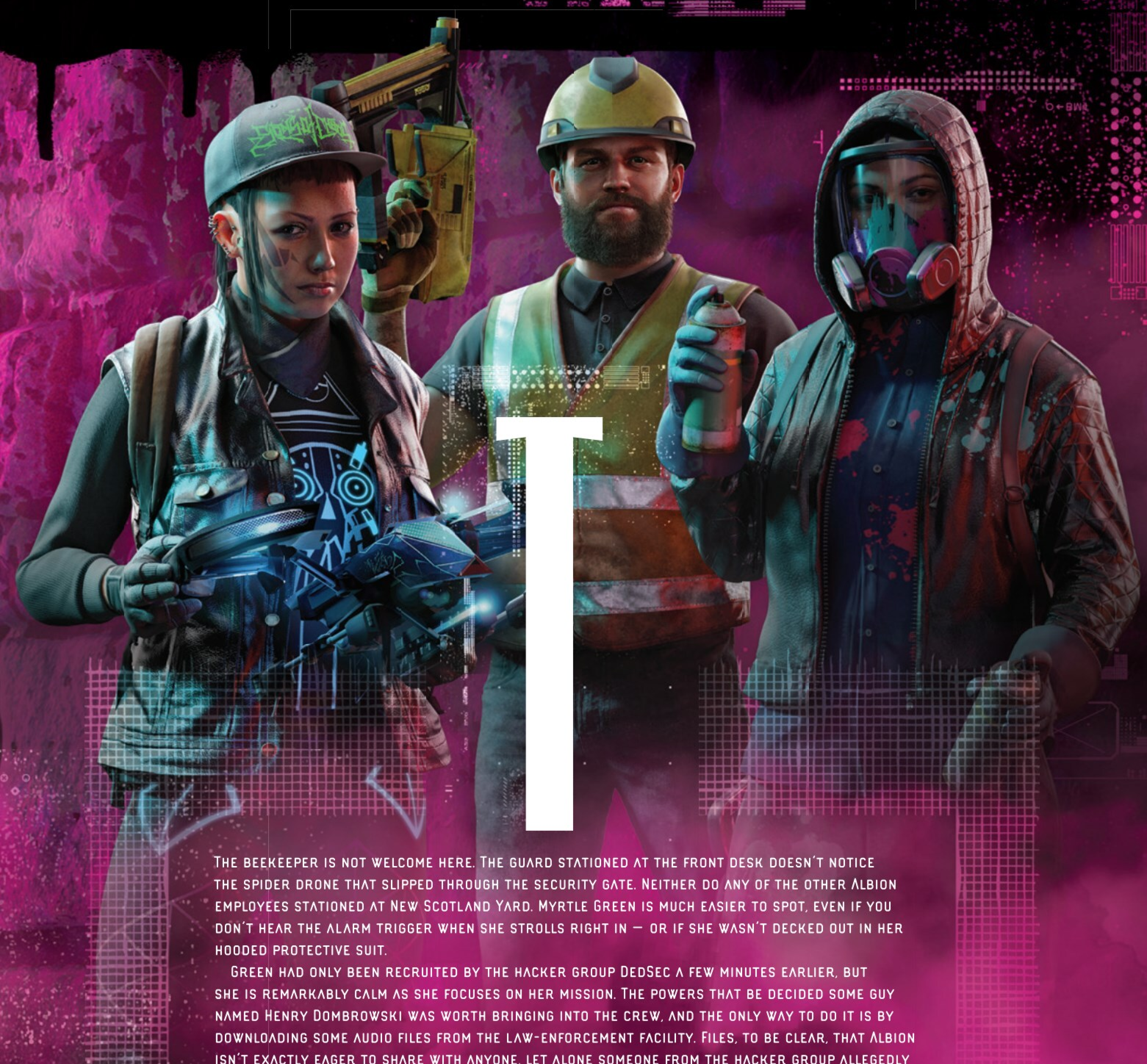
$29.95 | smirkandlaughter.com

LONDON BITES BACK

ALBION
O ← BM4

WATCH DOGS: LEGION,

Jeff Cork



The beekeeper is not welcome here. The guard stationed at the front desk doesn't notice the spider drone that slipped through the security gate. Neither do any of the other Albion employees stationed at New Scotland Yard. Myrtle Green is much easier to spot, even if you don't hear the alarm trigger when she strolls right in — or if she wasn't decked out in her hooded protective suit.

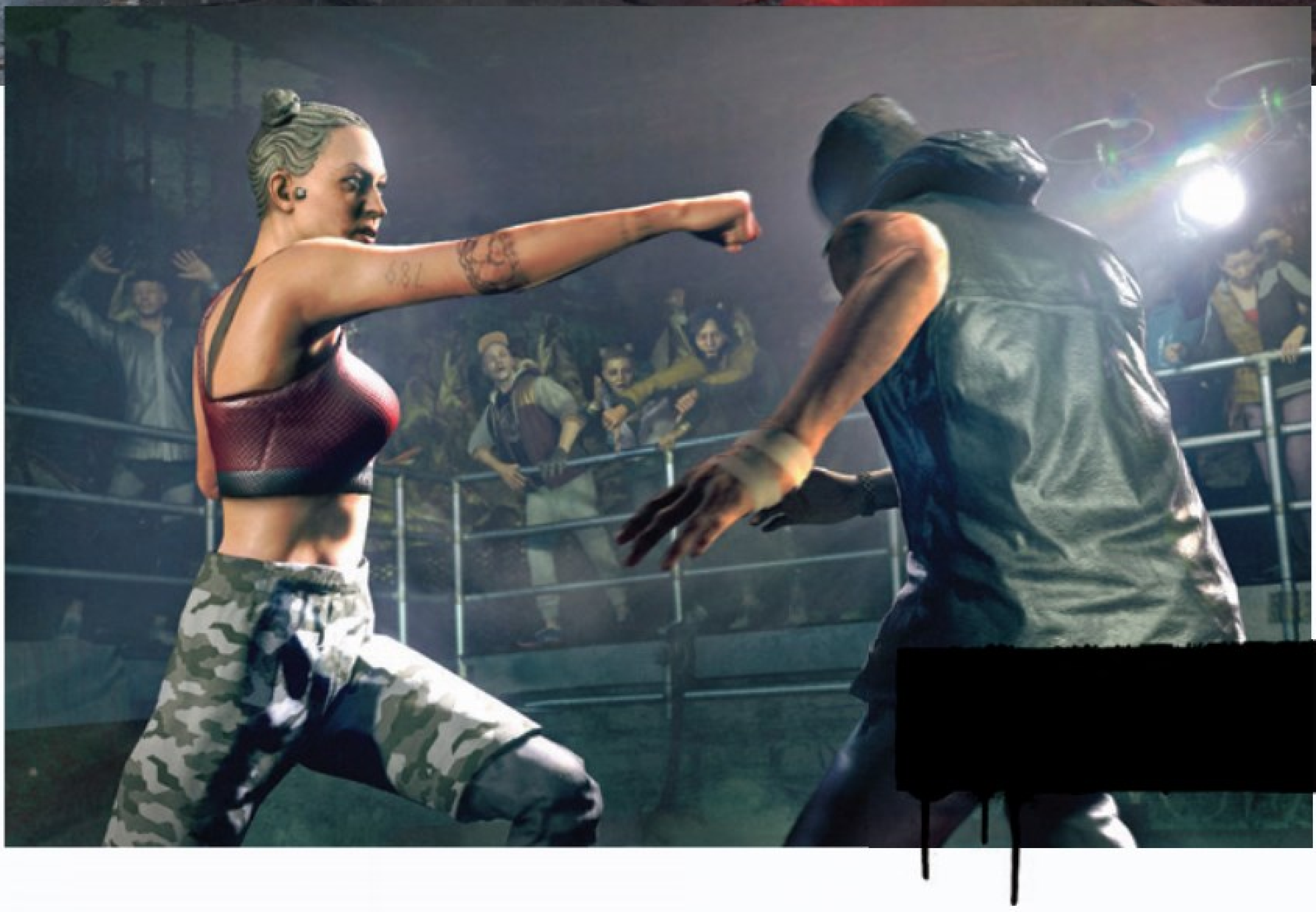
Green had only been recruited by the hacker group DedSec a few minutes earlier, but she is remarkably calm as she focuses on her mission. The powers that be decided some guy named Henry Dombrowski was worth bringing into the crew, and the only way to do it is by downloading some audio files from the law-enforcement facility. Files, to be clear, that Albion isn't exactly eager to share with anyone, let alone someone from the hacker group allegedly responsible for a string of terrorist bombings.

Green doesn't have the time or interest in setting anyone straight on that little bit of history. Those bombings were a frame job, to be sure, and they were effective. People were eager to relinquish freedom if it meant security. Whatever the case, right now Green's priority is dealing with the guards. They move away from firing nonlethal rounds once they realize this intruder's suit provides a protective barrier against electric shocks. She outstretches her arm and shows why such a barrier was necessary — a swarm of nanomachines, ordinarily used to pollinate flowers once the real bees' colonies collapsed — appear from nowhere, briefly orbiting their master before targeting three of the guards.

One guard ducks into an office to hide, but the swarm follows in a cartoonish, line-shaped swarm. The Albion thugs scream and try to brush them off in panicked swipes, to no avail. While they are distracted, Green pulls out a tool ordinarily used to manage the nanobees and zaps each guard unconscious. Back to the job at hand.

LEAVE YOUR MARK ON THE FUTURE
MARCH FOR HOMES
NO
NO
NO

NO
FUTURE
YOU'RE IN GOOD HANDS
A BETTER WAY
THE WORLD'S FINEST FOR ENGLAND



ALBION
ALBION

THE PARAMEDIC'S STORY

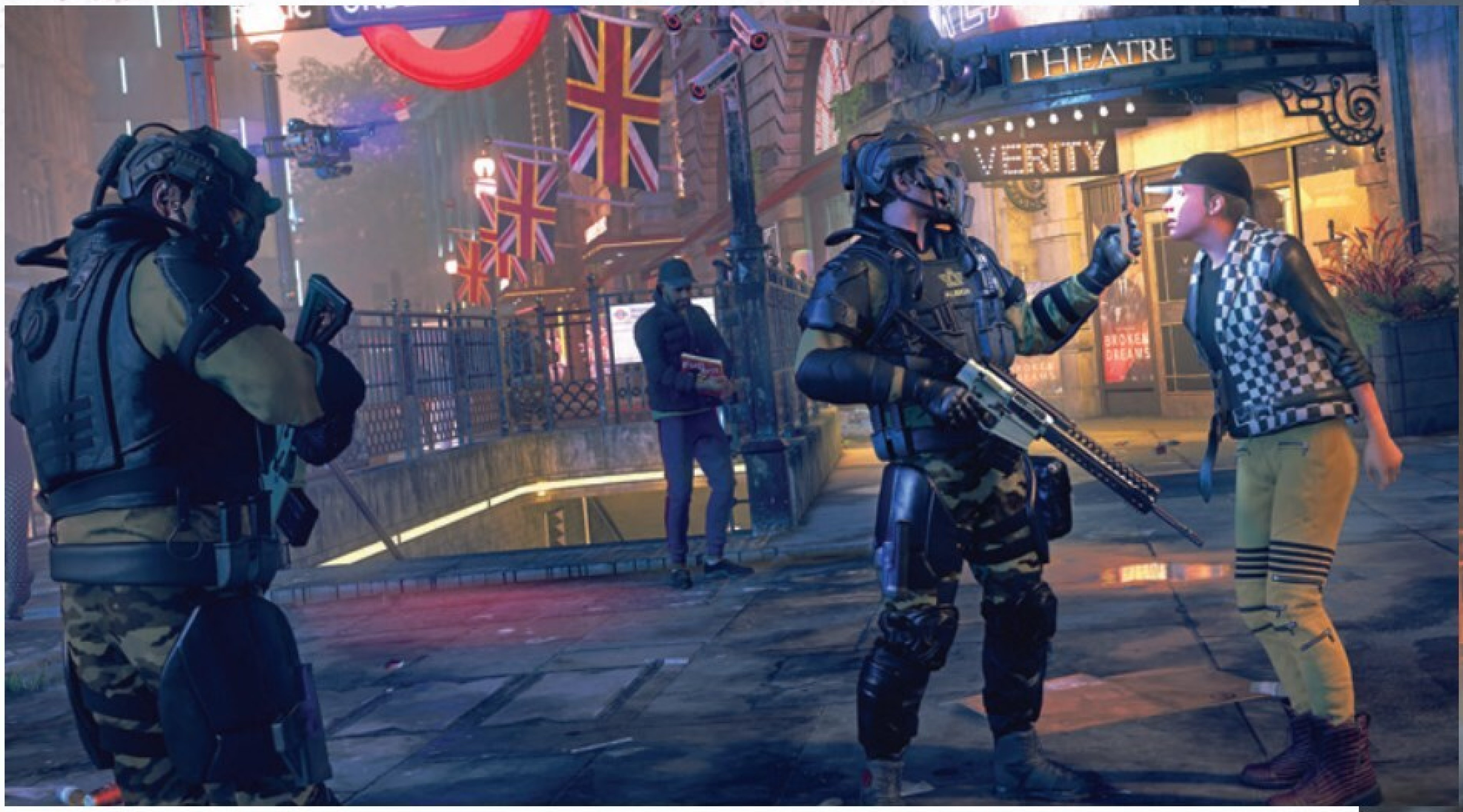
We start out underneath the London Eye, one of the city's more modern landmarks. The enormous Ferris wheel appears as it does in real life, although there's a lot more trash scattered around its base than I recall. Whirling the camera around, we see Big Ben across the river Thames, but it looks a bit different; a yellow sign reading "Albion" has been erected on its tower, as well as a display that marks the current threat level as "severe." Closer, a variety of paranoia-inducing propaganda scrolls by on electronic signs – an image of a cell phone with a skull on its screen, with the text "Be Vigilant. Always." written beneath. Walking along the riverbank, we see another that says, "If I don't know you, I don't trust you." It's time to move along.

First, I pull up my list of operatives. We're a small group right now, but that roster is about to grow over the course of the next few hours. Still, we're a solid crew. We have a construction worker, Kerry King, who has access to a cargo drone, a nail gun, and a massive wrench. We're all hackers here, but Matthew Day seems to be a natural; his hacks propagate throughout systems, and he can steal software keys at unlimited ranges. Heather Ramachandran wears an elegant white sleeveless dress, but her silenced pistol and personal vehicle – which can cloak and shoot missiles – points to her mastery of spycraft. We even have Noelle O'Keefe, an Albion contractor with an unhinged grin who was lured away from the outfit. There are a few others, but for now I'm going into the field with Egan O'Callaghan. He's a paramedic who has an ambulance and can help speed recovery time for his fellow operatives. I change out of his street clothes – studded jeans and a hoodie with bold prints – and into his uniform before stepping into the ambulance.

I'm able to drive around and sightsee, but I'd rather be productive. Looking at my in-game phone, I see that there are several people in our recruiting queue, including a barber and a repairman. I'm sure they're great people, but I target Anja Njoroge, a game developer with a 6G data plan that gives her faster downloads. If I know anything about Watch Dogs' hacking, it's that the faster you can make the numbers go up, the better – so Anja it is.

I pull up her recruitment mission, and I see that she wants to download some records from Albion. Apparently, she had her data access restricted while she was investigating abuses of power by several Albion officers. It sure seems as though she was onto something, and if we can get that data ourselves, we might be able to learn more. Better still, doing so is likely to make her more sympathetic to DedSec's cause, which can be tricky considering the current overall impression people have of the organization. "They're called DedSec, they're not called BunnySec, right?" Hocking jokes, adding that there's a bit of mysterious scariness about the group – in no small part because of those bombings.

RROR • ERROR • E
WARNING



After selecting the mission objective on the map, the GPS route is superimposed over the road. It's helpful for several reasons, not the least of which is that it gently reminds me that I'm supposed to be in the lane of traffic that I'm not used to driving in. Fortunately, turning the siren on gets people to clear a path for me as I get accustomed to this new perspective. In a subtle-but-appreciated touch, the route visibly banks around turns, which gives me a heads up that I need to slow down without having to constantly glance at the minimap. And because it's London, there are plenty of turns. That's one of the reasons Ubisoft chose the city for Watch Dogs: Legion.

"The layout of the city is so interesting and so different, too," Hocking says. "So many North American cities are very grid-focused, and even a lot of larger cities around the world are very grid-focused because of the points in time that they went through their transformations. But London has been a massive urban sprawl for centuries, so it has a very organic feel to it with lots of twisting, winding streets."

After a few minutes (where I may or may not have clipped several mailboxes, telephone poles, and red phone booths), I test out the new autodrive feature. Once activated, the ambulance slows to what seems like a crawl, though it's actually following proper speed limits and other traffic rules. It's a nice way to get where you're going while also being able to focus on the real points of interest: the people.

When you move your reticle on pedestrians, you get a quick indicator with their name and job title – standard Watch Dogs stuff. Since you can recruit everyone instead of merely draining their bank accounts or reading their texts, it pays to remain vigilant. While the ambulance heads to the objective, I move the camera around and look at everyone for potentially interesting recruits. At an Underground station, I see a skilled recruit marked with a green indicator. The system automatically flags certain character roles, such as the construction worker, police officer, and other specialized recruits if you don't have someone with that function in your group. That way, you can have a well-rounded crew. In this case, it's Jess Harris, a barrister. She has the bail-out ability, which can speed up the time an operative is held following an arrest – something that would come in handy with our beekeeper's current situation.

"These days the law's just a cudgel for the powerful," Egan says as we stop at a traffic light. "It's about time we brought on someone who knows how to swing it."

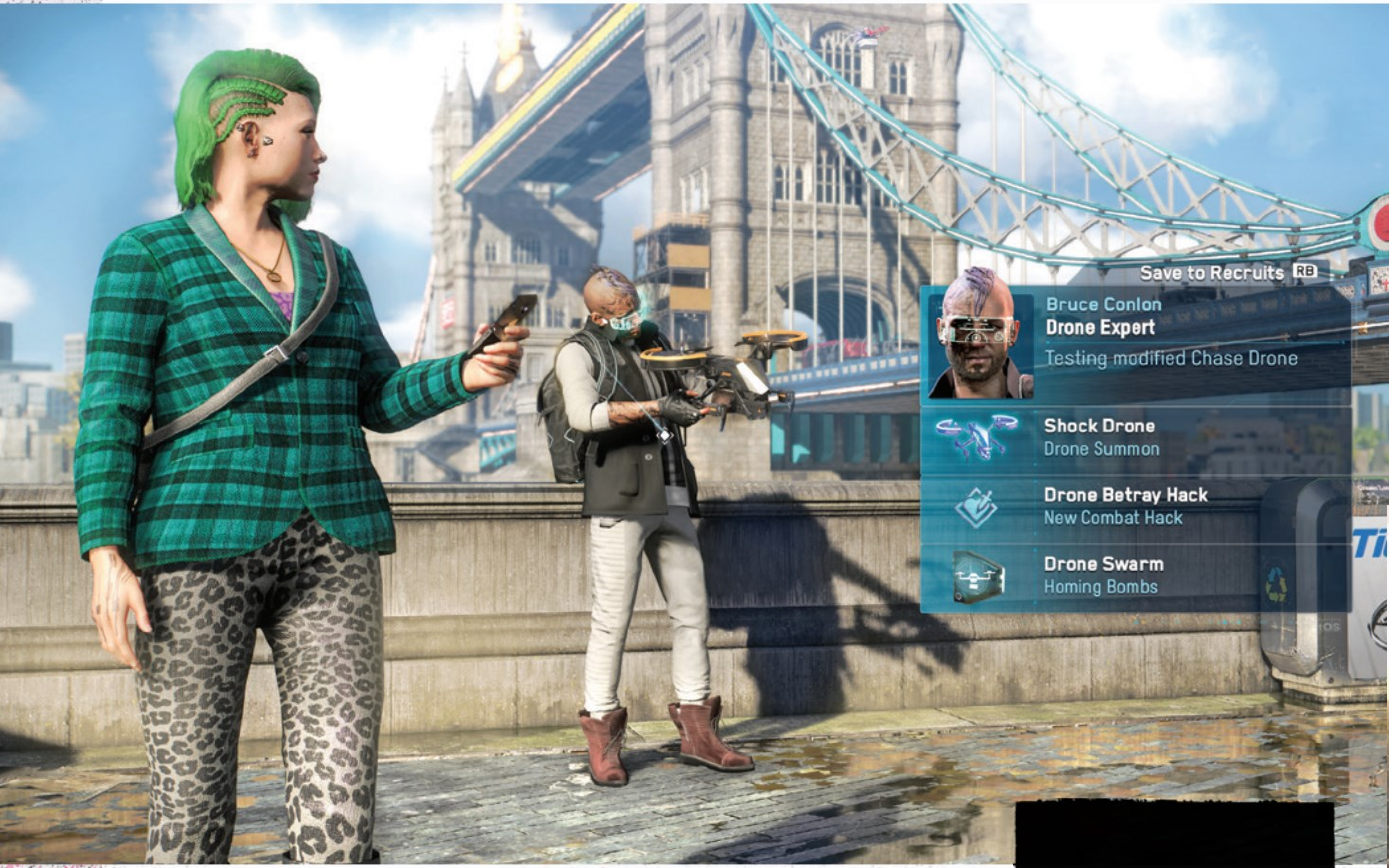
"Ironically, running an illegal resistance group would be easier if we had someone to consult for legal advice," replies Bagley, our A.I. companion. I don't have time to recruit her right now, but I add Jess to my list of candidates. Meanwhile, she continues to go about her day, none the wiser that she's been marked.

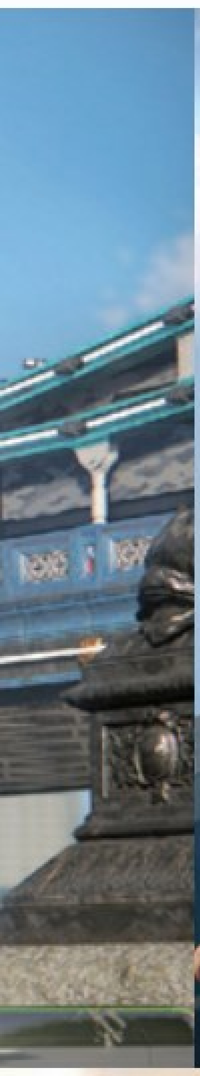
Outside the station, we see an Albion guard holding a woman at gunpoint. We highlight the woman and see that she's the wife of operative Kerry King. Now, that's interesting. Anja is going to have to wait. We hop out of the ambulance to investigate. We have the option to rescue her, but first we look at her profile. We can see that she has fast data and a drone-betray hack. She's a developer, and she has a negative impression of DedSec – apparently, she's not into her partner's side hustle.

We creep behind the Albion guard and perform a quick judo flip that leaves him on the ground. He's knocked unconscious and immediately covered by an AR cloaking device that renders him invisible. Doing this illegal action automatically prompts Egan to put on his mask, which is of a monocled, cigar-smoking pig. If that isn't suspicious enough already, the actual attack is spotted by a fellow Albion merc, who jumps out of his car to help his comrade. The Albion goon has a baton, but we're able to knock him to his knees and use our defibrillator paddles to render him unconscious. Consider it an occupational bonus.

NEXT-GEN?

BECAUSE OF THE STRANGE TIMES WE LIVE IN, I DIDN'T PLAY THE WATCH DOGS: LEGION DEMO IN A TYPICAL FORMAT. INSTEAD, UBISOFT HAD ME PLAY THE GAME VIA STREAMING ON A HIGH-END PC. THIS SETUP HIGHLIGHTED THE GAME'S BEAUTIFUL RAY-TRACING EFFECTS, WHICH CREATE DETAILED REFLECTIONS ON PUDDLES, WINDOWS, THE SIDES OF BUILDINGS – ANY PLACE WHERE YOU'D EXPECT THEM. I ASKED GAME DIRECTOR KENT HUDSON IF THE NEXT-GEN CONSOLE VERSIONS WOULD FEATURE SIMILAR GRAPHIC EFFECTS, AND THE RESPONSE WAS AFFIRMATIVE. HE COULDN'T ELABORATE BEYOND THAT.


Save to Recruits RB
Bruce Conlon
Drone Expert
Testing modified Chase Drone
Shock Drone
Drone Summon
Drone Betray Hack
New Combat Hack
Drone Swarm
Homing Bombs



PARCEL FOX

FUCKING HELP US !!!
CHECKPOINT AHEAD
EU
ALBION is MAKING A KILLING
OUR HOME IS NOT A WAR ZONE

THE ANARCHIST'S STORY

Once we settle into our next stolen car – there's a lot of that going on in this game – Bagley tells us about Janet Ghatak. She has a warrant out for her arrest. Not for long, that is, since we're DedSec. We have a couple of different ways to approach this problem, both of which involve hacking a ctOS hub that holds the records. One of them is at an Albion facility, and the other is at a Clan Kelley-controlled area. Clan Kelley seems like the more interesting scenario, since they're not likely to show any kind of restraint when we trespass.

We pull up to a grimy parking lot in the heart of Chinatown. The neighborhood has a distinctly different feel from other places we've seen, with lots of neon signage casting reflections on the rain-soaked streets. If there was any doubt about Clan Kelley's influence, the prevalence of the letter "K" spray painted on nearly every wall clears it up.

We hop into a camera, in another classically Watch Dogs move. From this vantage point, we add enemy markers and get a better sense of what we're up against. Unlike Watch Dogs 2, you don't enter into a different, persistent visual mode to see what's hackable. Instead, it's more like a brief pinging action, where things like cameras and electrical boxes are highlighted and the player continues to see the world as it is. Once you hijack a camera, however, all the other cameras are highlighted so you can easily see your options. You can also use the cameras to distract enemies, which makes it easier to reposition guards to sneak past or lure them away from patrol routes to take them out one at a time.

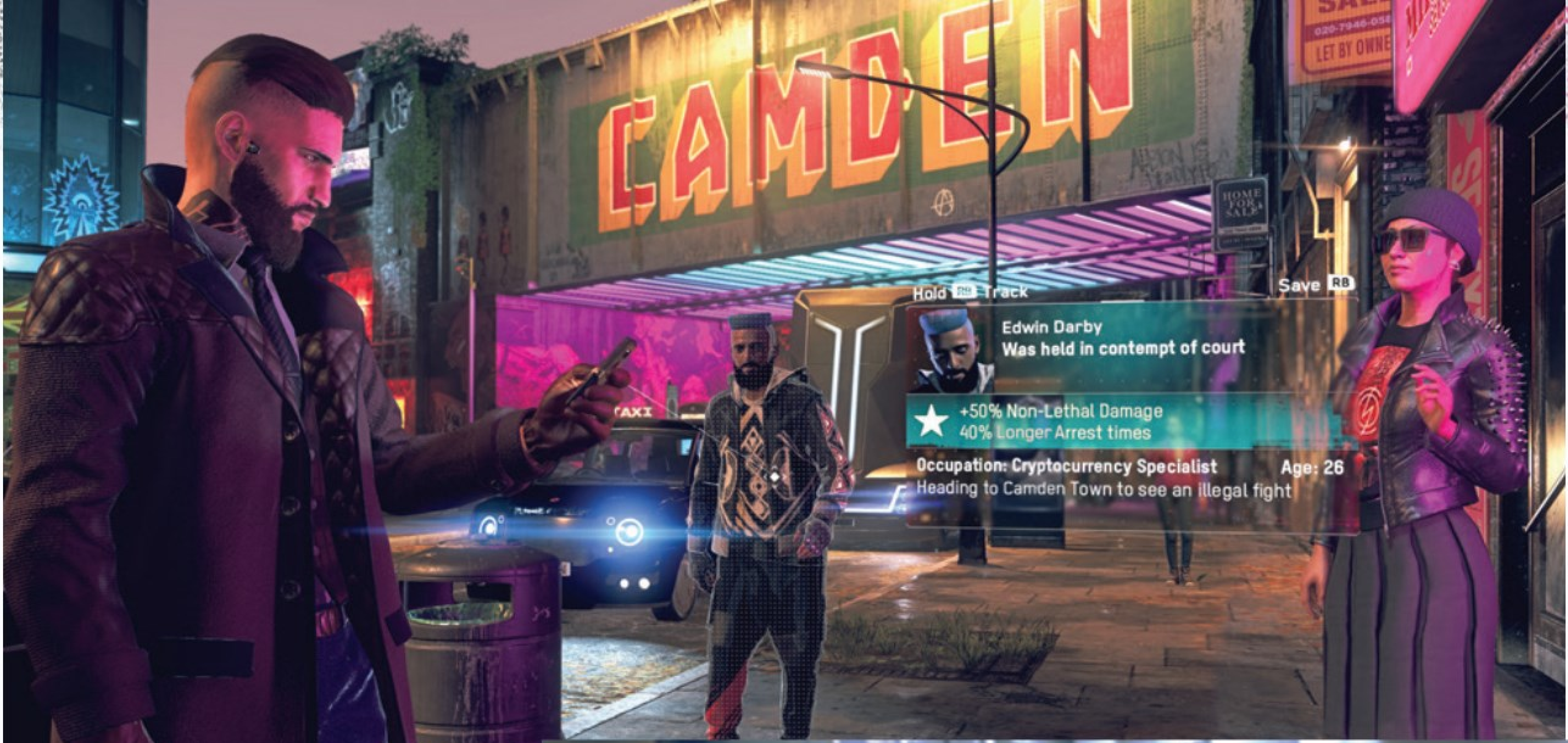
All of the Clan Kelley members we highlight have names, abilities, and relationships of their own. They have a natural dislike for DedSec, being competing criminal operations and all, but they could be recruited if I wanted to spend the time on them. They may be bad guys, but they're not necessarily irredeemably bad.

"If you really wanted to, you could use the deep-profiling system that exposes all the schedules and all the problems in peoples' lives, and if you can correct them, you can then change their opinion of DedSec and then recruit them to the cause," Crooks says. "The fact that you can use that to even recruit all the bad guys would take some time but you can literally empty an entire layout only by using scheduling and recruiting the whole group in that area – which is crazy."

It's a fairly large area to stake out, with stairs and overwatches, as well as a garage filled with multiple gang members inside. I hack a parked car and slam it in reverse to back over a patrolling captain while watching through the camera. It barely misses, so I hijack a chase drone and use its electronic cannon to take out the captain and his cohorts that have been drawn to the noise.

Now that the ranks are thinned out a little bit, we send our spider drone into the area, thanks to a hole in the wall. Saoirse hacks a door that would give her access, but we're going to try to complete this task while staying out of harm's way. It's a quick jaunt over to the ctOS hub and a rootkit installation. After that, we learn that Clan Kelley has identified Janet as a highly dangerous vigilante, which makes sense considering she raids the gang's properties and beats up anyone who's inside.

ALBION
ALBION
ALBION
ALBION


CAMDEN
TAXI
HOME FOR SALE
LET BY OWNER
Hold Track
Save RB

Edwin Darby
Was held in contempt of court

★ +50% Non-Lethal Damage
40% Longer Arrest times

Occupation: Cryptocurrency Specialist Age: 26
Heading to Camden Town to see an illegal fight

REASSEMBLING IN HOPES OF GREATN

» Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X • PS4 • Xbox One • PC • Stadia **» Style** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **» Publisher** Square Enix **» Developer** Crystal Dynamics, Eidos Montreal **» Release** September 4 (PS4, Xbox One, PC, Stadia), Holiday (PS5, Xbox Series X)

ESS

Crystal Dynamics' push to give Earth's Mightiest Heroes the game they deserve with Marvel's Avengers

by Brian Shea

Coming off the climactic conclusion to the Infinity Saga with *Avengers: Endgame* a month prior, Marvel's most iconic heroes had a full head of steam going into E3 2019. However, the reveal of Marvel's Avengers drew a broad range of criticism ranging from how the game ran to the way the characters looked. As a result, the hype train slowed and widespread concern grew about the state of the game.

A few months later, at Gamescom 2019, I played through the opening mission. While I enjoyed most of the experience, it wasn't the game Earth's Mightiest Heroes deserved. Then, much like the Avengers themselves do in the opening of their game, Crystal Dynamics and Square Enix went dark. The studio delayed the project from spring to fall in order to address player feedback, with its big reemergence happening in late June. The result was an Avengers game that looks renewed from the version that was widely criticized in 2019. I spoke to the developers to learn more about how the team is creating a unique Avengers story, what players can expect from the action following launch, and how the delay helped the studio fine-tune the experience.

PICKING UP THE PIECES

The opening mission that Crystal Dynamics showed off last year took place during A-Day, a celebratory festival in San Francisco honoring the Avengers and the opening of their west-coast headquarters. Unfortunately, this event erupts into violence as a mysterious foe led by the deadly mercenary Taskmaster attacks the Golden Gate Bridge. In this section, the player gets to experience brief sequences as each of the marquee heroes: Thor, Iron Man, Hulk, Captain America, and Black Widow. While the Avengers do their best to take down this force, it's not good enough, as the bridge attack turns out to be a distraction while the enemy targets the Avengers' helicarrier. The hovering leviathan, which is powered by a Terrigen crystal, is destroyed, killing Captain America and raining Terrigen Mist onto the city, granting uncontrolled powers to countless civilians.

With San Francisco reeling and the world watching in horror, the superpowered are outlawed, creating a void of security the world had become accustomed to since the establishment of the Avengers. To fill this vacuum, in steps tech giant Advanced Idea Mechanics (AIM), with a mission to replace the now-disbanded heroes. "They were offering a very noble solution, which is, 'With science and technology, we can offer safety and protection,' so a science-versus-superpowers solution was offered," says creative director Shaun Escayg.

AIM promises to use science to not only protect the world, but also cure the "Inhuman" infection that spread across the now-quarantined San Francisco due to the Terrigen explosion. Unfortunately, while AIM may appear to have the best interests of the population in mind, the organization is anything but noble. The company, led by founding member George Tarleton, twists the public fear of the Inhumans into a fear of all who possess superpowers.

Pretty soon, Avengers fan Kamala Khan, who was at the A-Day celebration and remains steadfast in her belief in Earth's Mightiest Heroes, uncovers a conspiracy that not only is AIM experimenting on the Inhumans, but the company might have even been

AIM
ADVANCED IDEA MECHANICS

behind the bridge attack and subsequent helicarrier explosion. While Kamala needs the help of the remaining heroes, she is anything but powerless.

In fact, being at A-Day, she is exposed to the Terrigen Mist and undergoes an Inhuman transformation of her own that allows her to enlarge and stretch parts of her body. She takes up the name Ms. Marvel, modeled after one of her favorite heroes, Captain Marvel. Unfortunately, since she now has powers, she must join many of her fellow San Fransicans in going into hiding. Following this turn, she becomes a central and key component to not only the reassembly of the Avengers, but the story of the game as a whole.

AN IGNOBLE AIM

While the emergence of Ms. Marvel is a positive side effect of the catastrophic events of A-Day, she isn't the only central character affected by the Terrigen blast in San Francisco. George Tarleton was also caught in the explosion and left injured. The aftereffects of the blast and exposure to the Terrigen cause Tarleton's brain to grow massive. Tarleton tries to recruit Kamala, saying he can help "cure" her of the Inhuman "sickness," but she doesn't buy it. She escapes AIM custody to bring the conspiracy to Bruce Banner, Tony Stark, and the rest of the Avengers.

However, reuniting the Avengers is easier said than done. Not only are the heroes spread out and isolated, but they are often at odds with each other thanks to distrust sown by AIM and Tarleton, or MODOK as he's come to be known. In fact, Tarleton's transformation has made him even more brilliant than before. This combination of technological might and super-genius intellect make him a major threat to the Avengers.

While those who have only watched the Marvel Cinematic Universe films might not know who MODOK is, comic readers are well-versed in the character's insidious nature. "We wanted a villain that was a formidable, Avenger-level threat, but more intelligent than the average villain, not just using technological might, but his ability to divide from within, his ability to propose a very provocative solution – even noble in some ways," Escayg says. "He's got Bruce Banner and Tony Stark at war; they can't even see eye-to-eye because Bruce believes that Hulk is a dangerous being and maybe the Avengers are as well, and Tony shares the opposite view, like Kamala, that without them, the world would be in jeopardy. This villain in particular was smarter, mighty, could wield that might and sway public opinion even within the Avengers themselves about how they view or perceive themselves."

Crystal Dynamics looked at the story it wanted to tell and realized that the malicious pessimism that AIM and MODOK operate under are perfect foils to the unfettered optimism Ms. Marvel has for the Avengers. Not only that, but they each personified the public conflict that's unfolding in the world regarding those who are superpowered.

"It created the best conflict of the two opposing themes: Are these people really superheroes? Or are they just mostly dangerous, powerful beings? Can we use science and technology to control and harness that power? Or is it their humanity, their empathy, or their differences that truly make them the greatest protectors of Earth?" Escayg says. "It was the perfect recipe for conflict and to showcase these opposing themes."

With a menacing and sophisticated organization led by a deranged-but-brilliant figurehead, the world needs the Avengers now more than ever. However, with the public opinion of the Avengers and trust within the ranks of the heroes at an all-time low, Kamala Khan has her work cut out for her if she wants to get the team back together. So begins Operation Reassemble.

ASSEMBLING YOUR OWN AVENGERS

While bringing together a team of Iron Man, Thor, Black Widow, Hulk, and Ms. Marvel is an exciting prospect, players can make the heroes their own with a deep customization system. Each Avenger has skills, heroic moves, and gear that can be customized to deliver the playstyle you want. Each hero's skills consist of four distinct categories and are upgraded through these skill trees. By using skill points earned through play, you can unlock new moves, combos, and attacks. For example, one of Thor's melee skills is the Hammer Spin, where he twirls Mjolnir around his wrist. Another is Mjolnir Cyclone, which lets him spin to perform a fierce area-of-effect attack. Meanwhile, one of Thor's ranged abilities is Manual Targeting, which gives you the ability to mark enemies to bounce your hammer off like a pinball.

On the heroic moves side, each hero has three categories to fill: assault, ultimate, and support. The assault heroic is the fastest to charge, with some moves allowing you to store multiple charges. These moves include attacks like Thor's ground pound and Black Widow's electrified projectile called Widow's Bite. Support heroics focus on helping your teammates. Warrior's Fury is Thor's, which calls down a special essence from the sky to grant nearby teammates temporary invulnerability. Ultimate heroics take the longest to charge, but they can change the course of battle. For example, Thor's God Blast calls down the power of the Bifrost from the Nine Realms to deliver a devastating attack that can pierce shields.

Thor is one of the most versatile heroes, but he's not the only one that can be played the way you want. By configuring your heroes your way, you're able to create different gameplay archetypes, even going as far as creating a support Iron Man or a ranged Hulk.

Marvel's Avengers lets you customize your skills, loadout, and look

You can even go deeper into the abilities you equip and use with a mastery tree, which lets you use a fine-toothed comb to configure and tweak every last piece of your heroes.

In addition to these skills and heroic abilities, players can further customize their heroes using gear, perks, artifacts, and more. Gear works much like it does in other games, giving stat boosts, while perks give you modifiers and buffs in specific situations. One piece of epic gear for Black Widow grants perks like ranged power attacks buffing defense and heavy combos increasing stun damage. Some gear even uses things like Pym Particles to shrink enemies, or gamma radiation to grant bonus damage modifiers.

"On top of all the unique powers the heroes had, we wanted to figure out what is something that none of them can do?" combat director Vince Napoli says. "We really leaned into the technological aspects of Marvel and some of the core concepts that are global to all heroes, which is the ability to use the Pym Particle technology and shrink enemies, or use Gamma Radiation to create a gamma status effect. We also have cosmic status effects and some other ones."

On top of all this, the team at Crystal Dynamics has created tons of cosmetics, including emotes and outfits. I'm particularly excited to see the various uniforms and suits from across Marvel's rich history for its most iconic characters. Some cosmetics are earned through mission completion, while others must be purchased via the in-game vendor, SHIELD's own Chastity McBryde. Some outfits also require you to complete iconic mission chains, while others can only be purchased through the game's online store. Players can choose from outfits like Iron Man's Stark Tech outfit inspired by *The Invincible Iron Man* or Thor's Donald Blake alias outfit from his first appearance in *Journey into Mystery*.

While this might sound overwhelming to people who just want to jump into a mission and mash buttons to victory, Napoli says Marvel's Avengers is still, at its base, an action game about playing as your favorite superhero. "You always want to make that an option; all great action games have that tuning where you can get in there and really quickly pick it up and have it feel really, really satisfying with little investment," he says. "The idea is once you're invested in that, you're more likely to go in and say, 'You know what? I do kind of like smashing guys around. What's the low barrier to entry to creating a better way to smash guys?' Then, once you're in there, we hope you take the next step, and then the next step, and the next step."

From the cosmetic tweaks to the way you progress your skill trees, all these customizations come together to allow you to play how you want to. In our first glimpse of gameplay since Crystal Dynamics' original A-Day reveal, we got a good look at how all of these components come together to deliver the experience you feel on the sticks.

Upgrading The Experience

In June, Crystal Dynamics announced that anyone who purchases a physical or digital copy of Marvel's Avengers on PlayStation 4 or Xbox One can upgrade to the PlayStation 5 or Xbox Series X version at a later date at no additional cost. While the upgrade only works within the same console family (PlayStation 4 must upgrade to PlayStation 5 and Xbox One must upgrade to Xbox Series X), you can transfer your save file and even play with those who still have the older version you transferred from.

The PlayStation 5 version features greatly enhanced visuals and performance, including leveraging the high-speed SSD, dramatically reducing load times, and enabling real-time streaming of the massive worlds. As of this writing, Square Enix has not commented on the advantages the Xbox Series X version will have over the Xbox One version, but the company says it will soon detail the platform-specific features available on Xbox Series X, PC, and Stadia. Both the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X versions will launch alongside the new consoles this holiday season.

While the main story is about the reassembly of the classic Avengers team, Crystal Dynamics also wants to tell the origin story of Ms. Marvel

An Eye For What's Next

As Crystal Dynamics has said, the launch of Marvel's Avengers is just the beginning. From there, the team will add new heroes, villains, missions, story arcs, and more, free of charge. Shortly after release, Hawkeye will be available as the first post-launch hero. Since the bow-and-arrow-wielding Avenger is considered a core member of the traditional Avengers team, the in-game story isn't just going to ignore that he was missing throughout the main campaign.

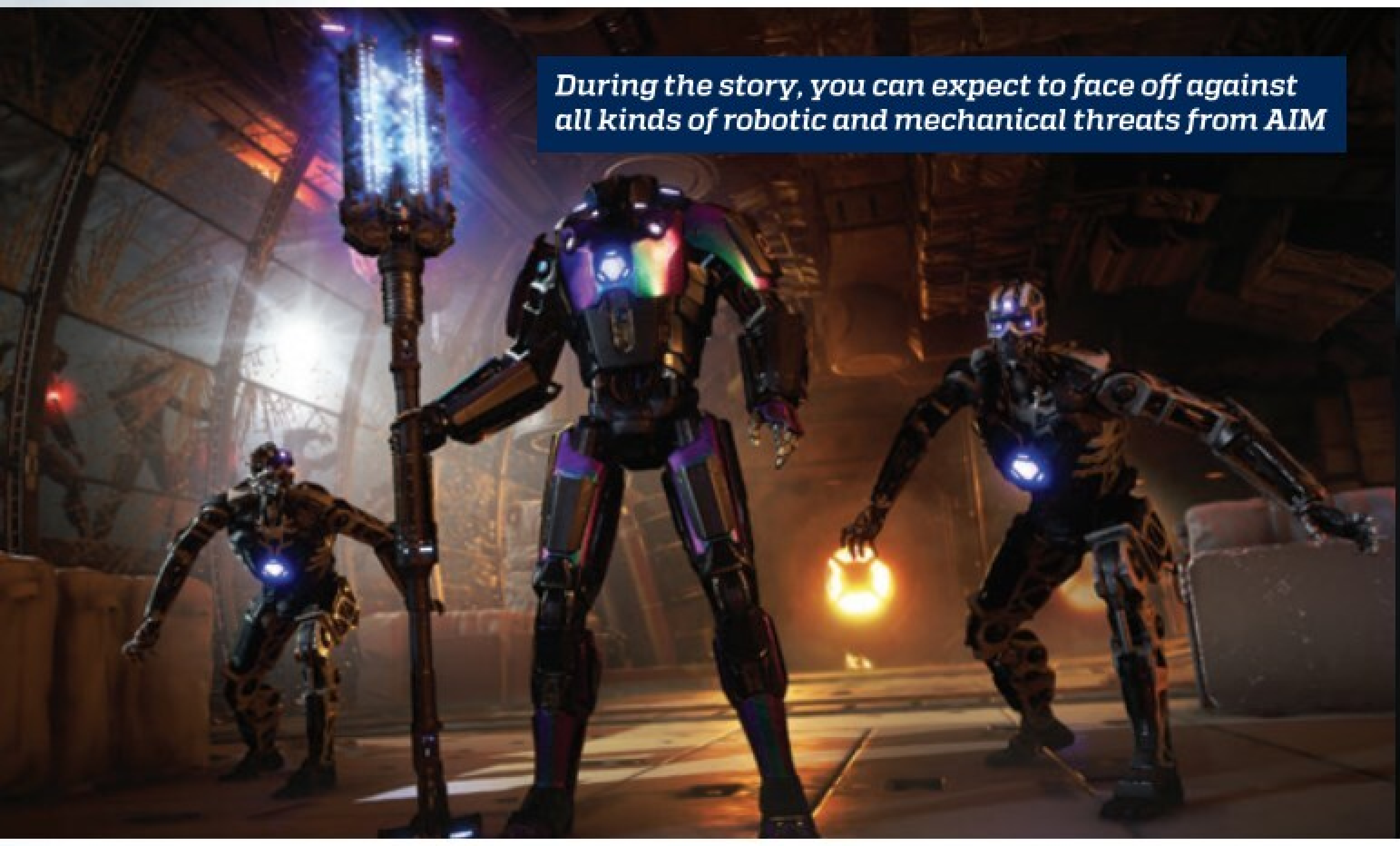
"He was lost track of at the end of [the attack on A-Day]," studio head Scot Amos says. "There's an entire story pack that comes with him that tells what he's being doing for these last five years. What you get is a full story that you can, uniquely, play his story as a full co-op experience. Then you can go back and replay all the stuff that comes out on day one in the Warzones with Hawkeye now, as well as all the new stuff that comes with him. He also has some unique story threads that tie up a few gaps that you might have noticed in some of the campaign but also throw out some new threads for the future."

Given Crystal Dynamics' history with the Tomb Raider series' satisfying bow combat, Hawkeye seems like a perfect fit for the studio. However, it's not a one-to-one translation, even if some of the gameplay mechanics were transferrable to this new character.

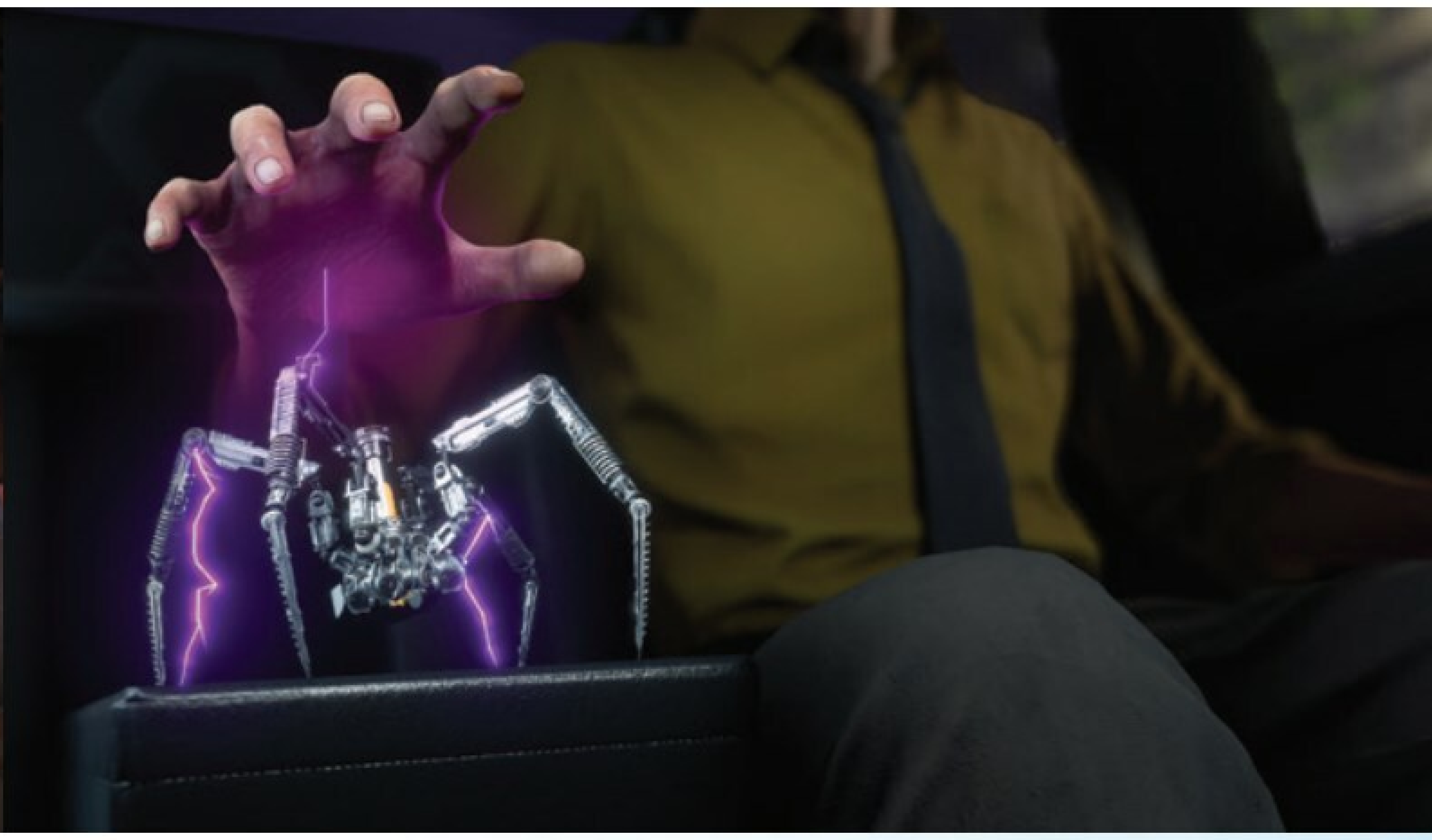
"Lara was designed as a character in a much different world," Amos says. "She's always about survival and she's not a superhero, but she's smart, and she's resourceful. And she's always that character that has to overcome through her cleverness and through some very specific tactics."

"Hawkeye is a superhero, so while we have these good mechanics that we're used to, you have to put them in a very action-forward kind of experience. The way he plays is different than Lara hunting and pecking and looking for optimal sniper ranges. You're jumping in it to win it with a bunch of these enemies coming at you very fast and very real time, so we had to actually improve it. Lara had some trick arrows like her explosive arrows and gas arrows, so we had a few tricks up our sleeves, but Hawkeye has a much broader palette. There's just so much fun stuff we can do. And it's not just a bow and arrow: It's literally this thing that gets to launch these devices that cause all kinds of unique explosions and debilitating effects."

If Hawkeye isn't your heroic cup of tea, don't worry; more updates are on the way, offering a variety of new opportunities to players. "I think people will be surprised," Amos says. "We have new regions and new expansions … and we haven't even talked about villains! … Yeah, Hawkeye is coming. But who is Hawkeye fighting and what's happening in the story? We can't wait to tell you!"



During the story, you can expect to face off against all kinds of robotic and mechanical threats from AIM



Warzone missions can be played in single-player alongside A.I. companions or online with up to four players

RISING TO HEROISM

As Ms. Marvel begins looking at how to bring the team back together, she brings the proof of her conspiracies to Bruce Banner, who then travels with her to Tony Stark's home. The two former Avengers continue butting heads over whether those with superpowers should be viewed as threats. In a later scene, we see a confrontation between Iron Man and Hulk. We don't see how this fight ends, but before the screen cuts to black, Iron Man summons a giant fist from his Hulkbuster suit to punch the enraged Banner off him.

That appears to be just the beginning of Kamala's quest to reassemble the Avengers. As Ms. Marvel continues tracking down the members of the disbanded team, the single-player story progresses, opening additional hero-specific missions. These hero missions are cinematic, single-player campaign stages focused on a particular member of the Avengers.

One such hero-specific mission we got a look at is Thor's "Once an Avenger…" mission. AIM is attacking the Avengers' newly rebuilt helicarrier and the team must work together to prevent it from being destroyed once again. AIM drops several robotic walkers onto the deck of the Chimera helicarrier as Ms. Marvel watches. Iron Man swoops down and blasts one off the craft and onto the streets below. The crowd runs in horror as a *Daily Bugle* newscaster recounts that this is the same day that AIM promised to reveal its Adaptoid program.

The mission appears to be one of his earliest in the game, as Thor walks up to the scene dressed in his Donald Blake alias outfit, complete with "volunteer" T-shirt and jeans. He calls Mjolnir from the Captain America memorial statue as if to say he's coming out of retirement. Thor rushes to the newscaster's side and pushes him away as another metallic meteorite crashes down from the helicarrier right where he was standing. The god of thunder then goes from street level to the ship using a hefty swing of his hammer to help his fellow Avengers do battle.

The scene on the helicarrier as Thor arrives is dire; the AIM walkers are breaching the hull with their drills and the likes of Iron Man and Ms. Marvel look in danger of being overwhelmed. Thor flies up and with a proclamation of, "You should know, I'm not in the best of moods!" smashes into the deck, sending electric shockwaves to destroy a group of Adaptoid robots and walkers.

As the gameplay sequence commences, Thor wields his hammer mightily as the rest of the Avengers chime in on comms to talk about how glad they are to see him back in action. Every swing of Mjolnir looks as though it carries weight – something I felt was missing during my initial hands-on experience last year. Every time the hammer smashes into an enemy, it rings out with a satisfying clang. Players can weave together combos using heavy and light attacks or use long presses to use signature attacks.

Thor turns his attention to one of the walkers, which not only protects itself with an electromagnetic field, but can blast projectiles, shoot flames, and take a hefty helping of damage. Once Thor gets inside the radius of the shield, he unloads on it with heavy combos using the hammer and lightning. Thor finally does the walker in by throwing his hammer into the core, grabbing it and uppercutting before calling down a barrage of lightning to finish it off.

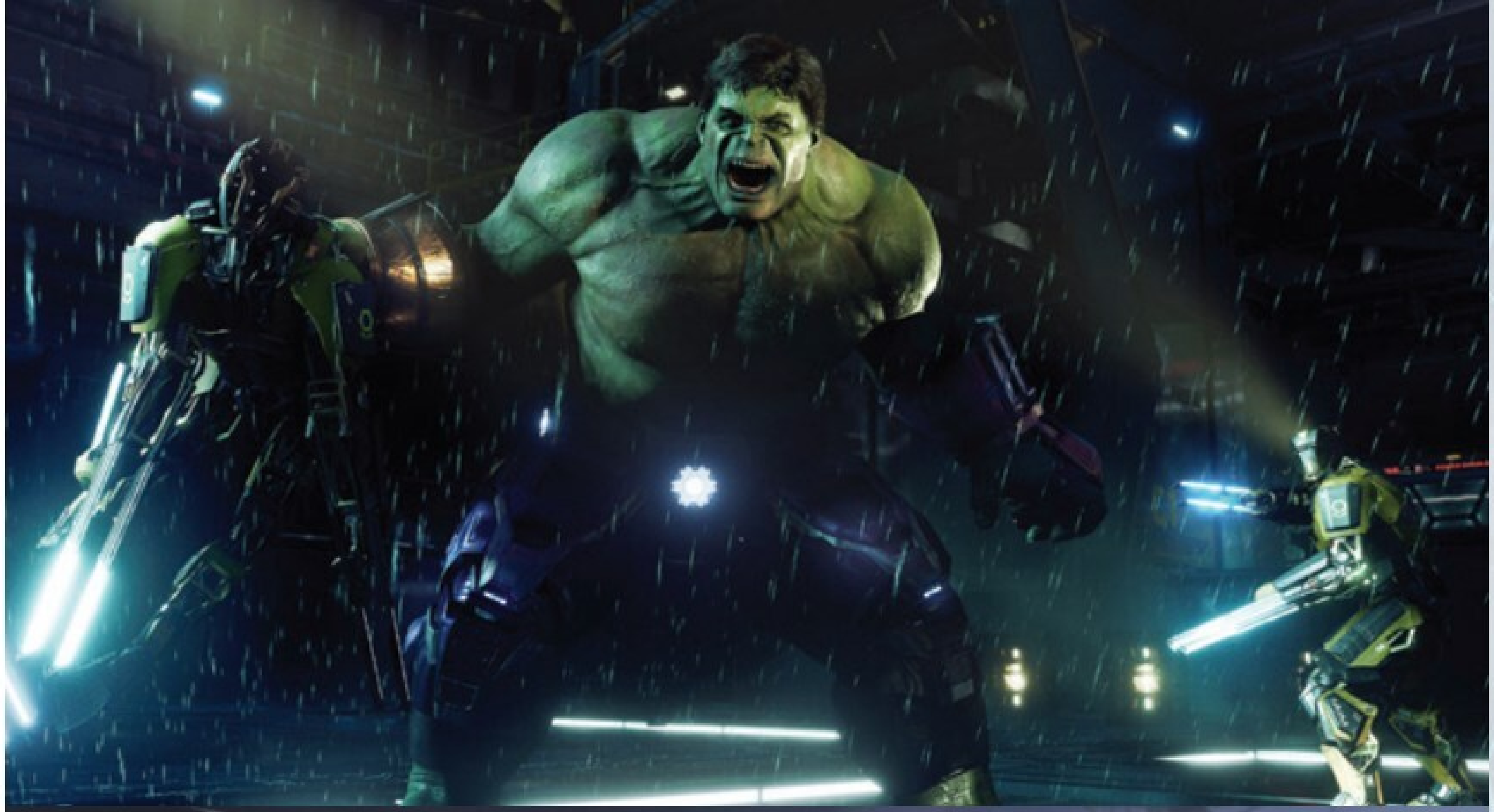
Thor spots Hulk on a higher deck and joins him. Hulk doesn't seem happy to see the Asgardian and reacts by throwing the AIM robot he just dismantled at the god of thunder, to which Thor remarks, "Just like old times." The two then hurtle forward, blasting, smashing, and destroying encroaching mechs. Thor possesses a wide range of abilities that make him viable both from range and up close. His heavy hits make him a nightmare for the mechs that swarm him, while his hammer tosses and lightning summons let him pick apart enemies from farther away.

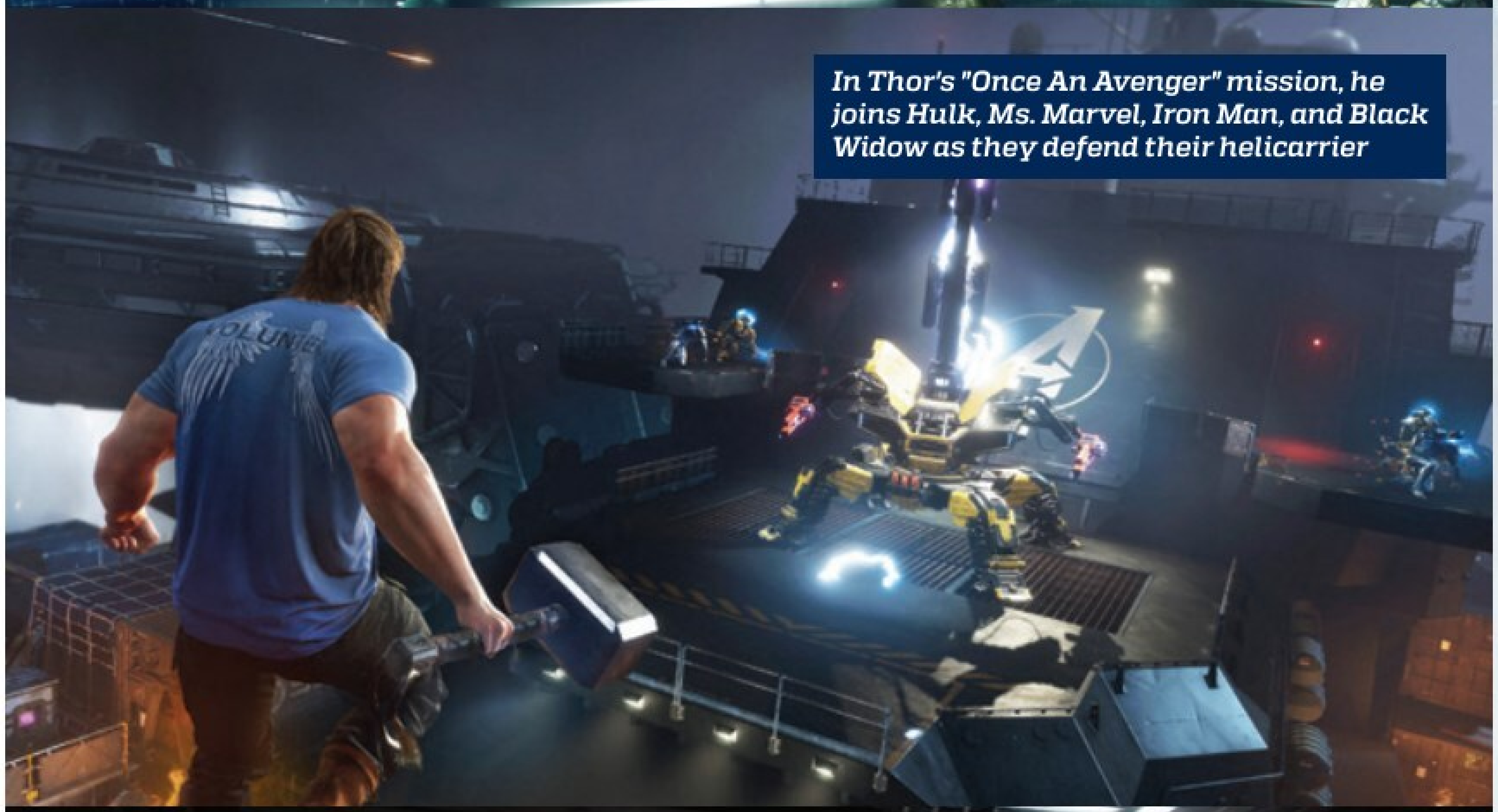
Thor and Hulk zero in on another walker. After they knock its health down, the two perform a team finisher where Thor flips the walker over, Hulk jumps on top with a chunk of the ground and smashes it, and Thor channels electricity through Mjolnir to deliver the final blow. In another team-up instance, the two collaborate with Thor slamming down into the middle of the walker, Hulk ripping its leg off and bludgeoning the walker with it. Thor and Hulk aren't the only ones who can team up; in another gameplay sequence, I see Ms. Marvel and Hulk dismantling a robot together.

The deck continues to flood with more mechs, drones, and walkers, with Thor, Iron Man, and Hulk doing their best to keep up. MODOK announces he has one last card to play: a giant walker, which he drops right onto the middle of the ship to drill down into the engine room. Thor remarks that he can handle it himself, to which Iron Man rebuts, "You don't have to! That's the whole point."

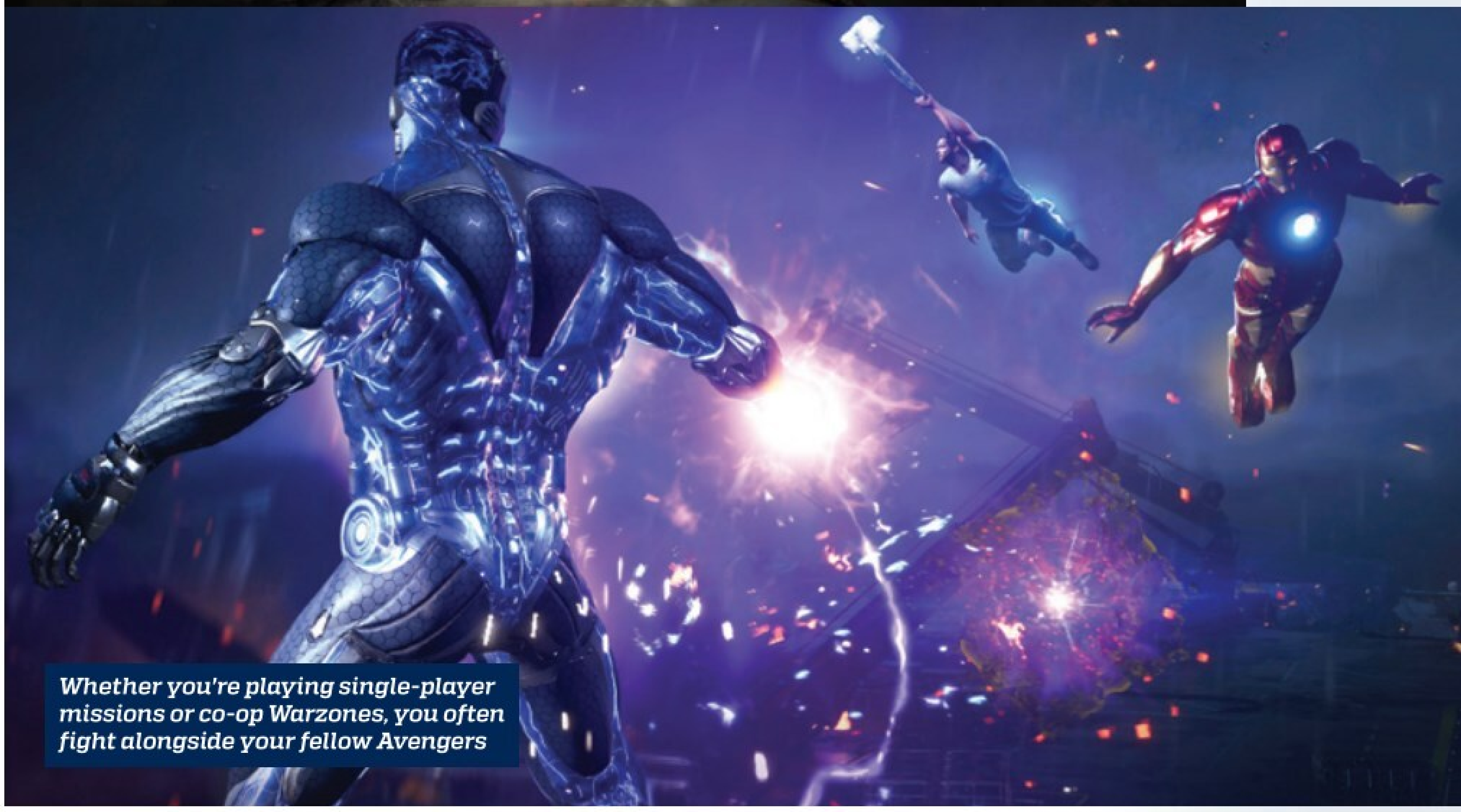
Thor gets knocked to a lower deck to once again join Hulk in battling some Adaptoids. He summons his Warrior's Fury support heroic onto Hulk to grant the green behemoth temporarily invulnerability and let him smash to his heart's content. Thor then redirects his attention to the giant walker, which possesses a special Stark Tech shield that Iron Man can't penetrate with his beams. Luckily, Thor has an ultimate ready, and he calls down the power of the Bifrost to bypass the shield, demolish the walker, and thwart MODOK's plan.

Despite the threat being neutralized, the damage is done, and Black Widow comes over the radio to say there's not enough power to restart the engines. Tony gives Thor his cue and the Asgardian blasts electricity into the front engines just in time to prevent the Chimera from crashing into the city below. This taste of the cinematic hero missions made me excited to see how else Crystal Dynamics can capture the feeling of being a powerful superhero through curated missions designed with specific heroes in mind. However, with so much customization and gameplay variables on the field, Warzone might be where Marvel's Avengers really flexes its muscles.





In Thor's "Once An Avenger" mission, he joins Hulk, Ms. Marvel, Iron Man, and Black Widow as they defend their helicarrier



Whether you're playing single-player missions or co-op Warzones, you often fight alongside your fellow Avengers

ALL TOGETHER NOW

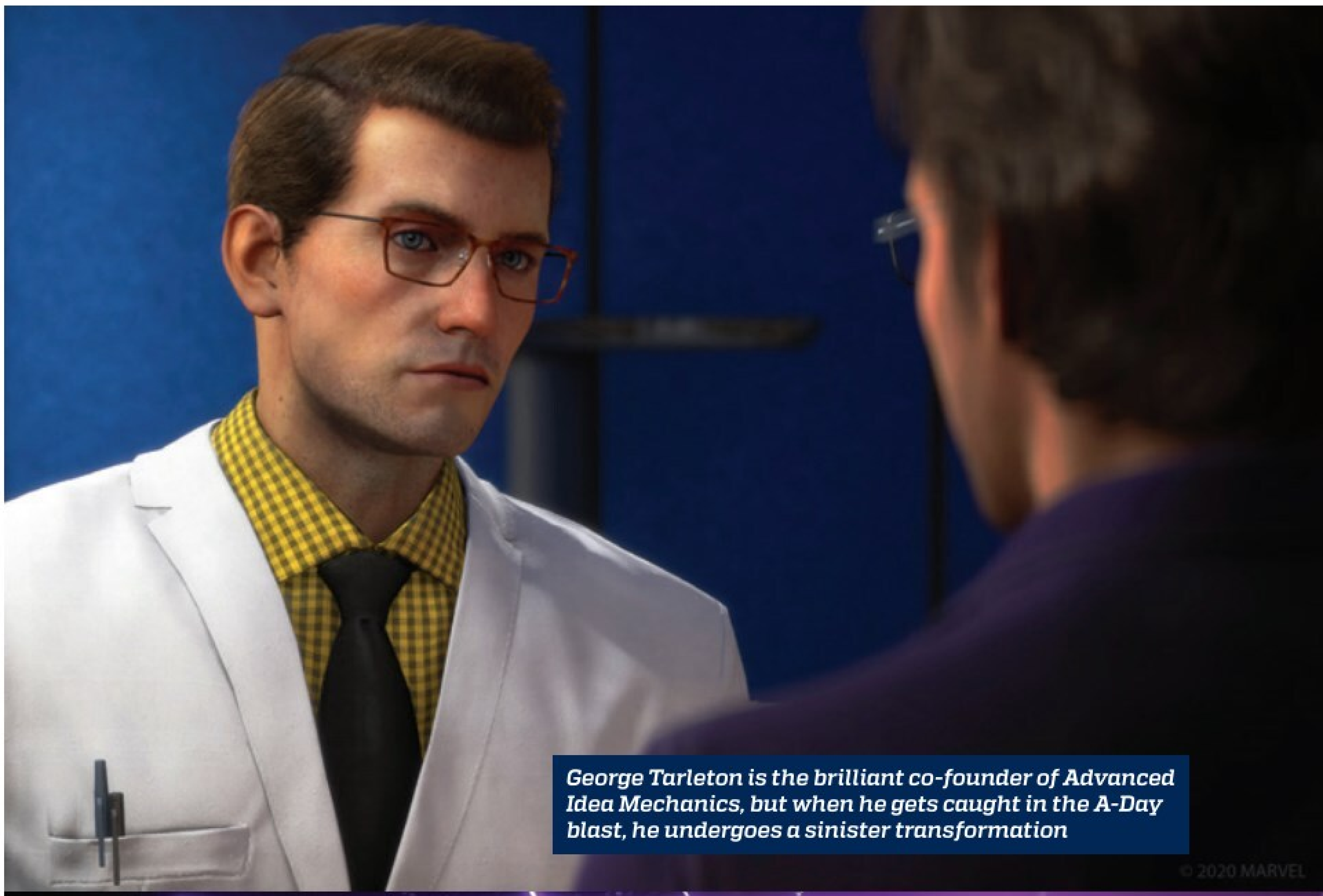
Learning more about each individual character through the hero missions seems like a great way to delve into the lore of this title and the universe it exists in, but the Avengers are all about teaming up to save the day. With Warzones, you can take on missions with up to four players online, or offline alongside A.I. companions. All the customization you do with your heroes plays an even bigger role in Warzone missions, as not only are you bringing your tailor-made Avenger into the mission, but any A.I. characters you fight alongside are the versions you made using the skills, gear, and cosmetics.

The hero missions are meant to advance the story, but Warzones also take place within the narrative, with the team coming together to fight AIM. As such, you continue earning experience and upgrades from completing these missions, even if they aren't primarily designed with advancing the story in mind. You get missions from peripheral Marvel characters like Tony Stark's A.I. Jarvis, SHIELD's Maria Hill, or brilliant scientist Hank Pym. Once you select a mission, you jump into the Quinjet for matchmaking and hero selection.

Warzones take you all over the world, from remote locations to dense cities. Some Warzones are designed for team exploration and traversal, while others take place in tight corridors and buildings with a focus on combat. Each Warzone has a variety of objective-based missions and battles from which you can reap the rewards.

"There's all these different things going on, and all of these are in different regions, so we could have built this giant, open-world game, but that wouldn't have allowed us to have the Avengers be this global presence that can pretty much go anywhere and react to any threat," Warzone director Phil Therien says. "Instead, we built regions that are basically small subsets of open world where we have many missions. That's allowed us to have cities, forests, deserts, we can go underwater, we can go into orbit around the Earth. That really lets us tell the stories that we want to be telling with the Avengers."

In addition to Warzones, you also work to repair your helicarrier and work with different resistance factions, headed up by recognizable comic characters like Dum Dum Dugan and Nick Fury. As you raise your reputation with these various factions, you gain access to new vendors, challenges, and items. You'll want to have access to these powerful allies as new heroes, threats, and regions emerge as a part of Crystal Dynamics' live-service roadmap.



George Tarleton is the brilliant co-founder of Advanced Idea Mechanics, but when he gets caught in the A-Day blast, he undergoes a sinister transformation

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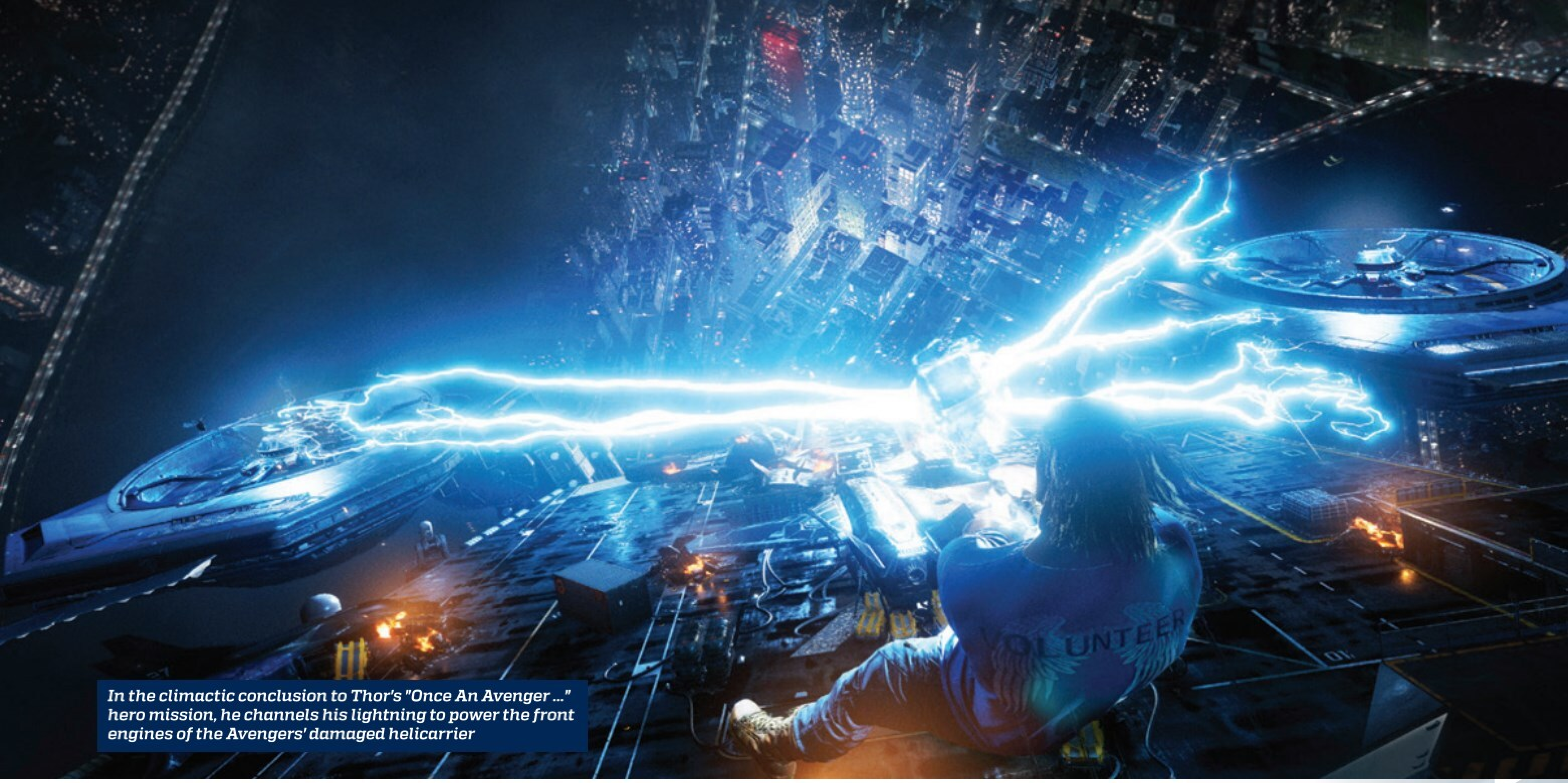
The Journey To Be Worthy

While Marvel's Avengers is much larger in scope than the A-Day footage Crystal Dynamics debuted with, feedback on that small slice was intense and plentiful, which helped the team decide on the four-month delay. "We wanted to respond to fan feedback," creative director Shaun Escayg says. "We wanted to get the opportunity to polish and create a world worth playing in for years to come, but also give the opportunity to hear what the fans wanted, see how we could improve in areas that we have already invested in the storyline and timeline, and also perceive what the future of this game could be, how big it can be, how powerful it can be, how moving it can be."

When I played the opening sequence last year, I loved how Black Widow, Hulk, and Captain America felt, but playing as the powerful Thor or the tech-loaded Iron Man just didn't give me the sense of power I wanted to feel as I blasted through waves of enemies. When I ask Escayg what exactly the team addressed with the added time, he specifically references those two heroes as if on cue. "We wanted the characters to look, feel, especially play certain ways so that you weren't just passively watching or feeling like you were bombarded by cutscenes, but you would feel that power on the stick," Escayg says. "You would experience Thor's hammer, experience Iron Man's blast, and feel mighty as opposed to simply looking at mighty stuff."

With the delay behind them, and the release date a few short months away, the team at Crystal Dynamics doubled down on its commitment to releasing a game worthy of wielding Thor's Mjolnir or Iron Man's suit. The result, as shown in the War Table presentation, is a game that appears to have learned from its early missteps and has transformed into a game to once again be excited for.


In the climactic conclusion to Thor's "Once An Avenger ..." hero mission, he channels his lightning to power the front engines of the Avengers' damaged helicarrier

THE ROAD FORWARD

At launch, Marvel's Avengers hopes to deliver an all-in-one superhero experience in line with the rich pedigree of Crystal Dynamics, but much like the comics and movies, the universe is always expanding. While you can purchase items from the in-game store, heroes, villains, and regions are planned to be added at no additional cost.

"If we look at the main campaign, that's kind of Kamala in that perspective as the point-of-view character, reassembling your heroes, getting through the campaign, understanding AIM and MODOK, and that story, that's just getting your team together," studio head Scot Amos says. "Then, as we start adding more heroes and more regions, we actually will add more stories – like full stories that actually have a front and an end and like, 'Hey, we're introducing a new hero, and here's an actual story arc through that particular region they may be a part of.' That also includes new villains. We'll actually get new villains – named villains – who will start showing up. This world continually expands. It starts with AIM and it's very much about understanding AIM and the situation with them, that will start evolving further and further as we get more content released month to month and even months past that."

Much like in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Crystal Dynamics is dropping subtle hints throughout the launch content to give players fuel to theorize about what's next. "Some of the hooks we cast into the water on day one, you're like, 'Oh, that's kind of cool. AIM has this undersea base. It's doing some cool technology. I wonder if that ever goes somewhere.' Then later, we pay that off with, 'Oh my gosh! That tied to this, and now this other character showed up!'" Amos says. "Those types of arcs are things we're starting at the core level and then adding these heroes, regions, and villains at no additional cost."

Crystal Dynamics hopes to regularly support Marvel's Avengers with post-launch content for years to come, but first, it needs to drive home a strong launch to establish a fan base that would necessitate such a long-term roadmap. Following the success of another modern Marvel superhero game, Insomniac's Spider-Man in 2018, Marvel's Avengers has a lot to live up to. However, with the improvements shown in the recent footage, as well as the understanding the studio demonstrates about what it needed to improve upon from its initial reveal, the Avengers are once again looking mighty. ◆

» PLATFORM
PS5 • Xbox Series X
PS4 • Xbox One • Stadia • PC

» STYLE
1- Player Action/Role-Playing

» PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

» DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Montreal

» RELEASE
November 17

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE HALLS OF THE SLAIN

Over five hours with Assassin's Creed Valhalla

BY BEN REEVES

THE KING IS DEAD

... but for the Vikings, that's merely a chance to build something new. When the Norse warriors first entered England in 873 CE, they discovered a land at war with itself. Several groups of Anglo-Saxons vie for power in a wild and untamed country. The Viking people may be fierce, but in England, they are also outnumbered. In order to survive, this band of Scandinavian settlers must make new alliances and friendships. To them, war isn't a hardship, it's an opportunity.

LEADING THE CHARGE

The tip of the Viking spear is a young warrior named Eivor. Players guide this capable hero throughout England to help them establish a new settlement for their kinsmen. As with Assassin's Creed Odyssey, players choose Eivor's gender at the beginning of the game and then guide him or her as they learn new abilities, build a settlement, and obtain powerful gear.

Eivor's journey eventually takes them to the territory of East Anglia, where they make a political alliance with a would-be king named Oswald of Ellmenhind. Unfortunately, before Oswald is crowned, a rival clan of Danes led by a man named Rued invades, apparently killing Oswald and leaving Eivor's clan in the middle of hostile territory. Naturally, Eivor can't let this stand. If Rued's clan wanted a war with the Vikings, they got one.

Still, before Eivor leads an assault against Rued, the clan must rally more troops to their cause. To win the support of a local township, Eivor leads a raid against a group of bandits. These raids function a bit like the fortress assaults in Odyssey, and Eivor can tackle

them head-on with a bloody axe or skulk through the shadows, cleaning house with a hidden blade.

During my first playthrough of the demo content, I took the stealthy route. In the last couple Assassin's Creed titles, your success as an assassin was based on your skill level and the quality of your gear, so you could easily run into situations where you performed a stealth takedown only to watch your victim stand back up. In Valhalla, stealth attacks are more likely to take down enemies in one hit. I still encountered a few stronger opponents who shrugged off my hidden blade, but this was rare. Even so, when you initiate a stealth attack against a strong enemy, you have the chance to complete a timed button press that does extra damage, meaning you can still assassinate these hardy enemies without raising the alarm.

"We brought back a couple of stealth mechanics," says assistant level-design director Laurence Letalien. "You can disguise yourself in certain areas where there are civilians. Guards are less likely to notice you when you have your hood up, and won't notice you at all in crowds. Even if you're in an area you shouldn't be, you can disguise yourself so it's harder to get detected. We also brought back some social-stealth elements, like the monks from old Assassin's Creed games, so you can navigate the world a bit while being stealthy."

During my stealth raid, I cleared out an entire encampment without alerting anyone, but the end-boss encounter almost did me in. On my second playthrough, I led my fellow warriors into battle, and we completed the raid in about half the time. My soldiers did an exceptional job distracting the boss, which made that encounter much easier. You can complete most missions with a mix of stealth and aggressive combat. During one botched stealth encounter, I blew my war horn and called my men into battle, and they helped me clear out the rest of the encampment and finish the mission. Valhalla's design is flexible enough to let you complete each conflict as stealthy or aggressive as you like.

Eivor can be male or female. You can also change Eivor's gender as you play to see the different ways people react to the character

RAIDING GEAR

After completing my first raid, I discover a Book of Knowledge, which unlocks a new ability called Dive of the Valkyrie. Most abilities are learned by finding these tomes hidden around the world. However, these texts are often heavily guarded or at the center of military camps. Valhalla's world contains multiple copies of each ability book, but if you find two of the same volume, their associated ability grows stronger.

I immediately put Dive of the Valkyrie to the test, and it becomes my go-to move in combat, allowing Eivor to launch into the air before landing ferociously atop a single foe, crushing them underfoot. Another useful ability has Eivor grabbing an enemy and then kicking them to the ground, which stuns them and opens them up for a finishing blow. Meanwhile, Throwing Axe Fury allows Eivor to throw a series of axes that hit any opponent within a set range, which comes in handy for managing large crowds.

Many of Eivor's abilities are great in combat, but some have other uses. One bow ability called Thorn of Slumber puts enemies to sleep, and I find it instrumental for completing encounters without causing a ruckus. A handful of other bow-based abilities have Eivor dipping arrows in poison, calling down a raven to distract foes, or marking multiple enemies before releasing a volley of arrows.

In addition to abilities, Eivor has a massive skill tree. Using points earned after each level, you empower Eivor with an assortment of passive skills. "The progression system is pretty new," Letalien says. "We have three main character routes that you can take. They are called the bear, the wolf, and the raven, and those correspond to the warrior, the hunter, and the assassin ways of playing."

Valhalla's skill tree is big and its edges are obscured by fog, so you won't be able to see all your options until you begin unlocking nodes leading down each path. Naturally, these skills run the gamut and allow you to buff your various attacks, increase your resistances to things like fire, and otherwise improve your stealth capabilities.

The final element of Valhalla's progression system is the collection of random loot Eivor amasses during their journey. As with the past couple entries in the series, players gather resources, such as leather and iron, which can be used to upgrade this gear, so if you find something you really love, you won't necessarily need to swap it out when something better comes along.

During my session, I played around with an assortment of weapons, including two-handed spears, long-range bows, and a spinning flail that delivered a series of small rapid-fire attacks. Eivor can dual-wield one-handed weapons – in fact, you can dual-wield shields if you're so inclined. However, my favorite was an axe/shield combo, which allowed me to parry most enemy attacks and set my opponents up for instant takedowns.

GENDER ROLE

Choosing your gender at the beginning of an RPG might not sound novel, but Ubisoft's approach to storytelling might be, because you are never locked into this choice in Valhalla. At any point, you can swap Eivor's gender. I played through a couple of sections as both male and female versions of Eivor, and while some of the dialogue changes based on your gender, those changes are minimal and don't seem to affect the narrative greatly.

"Through the science-fiction aspect of our brand, through the Animus device that lets you read genetic memories, we found a cool way to justify the choice and make either male or female Eivor a part of the story," says narrative director Darby McDevitt. "The choice itself is actually a part of the story, why you can choose male or female is a part of our larger story. That answer and that mystery fully embrace the historical and science-fiction aspect of our franchise."

World events is Ubisoft's term for Valhalla's side quests, which are short and happen organically as you explore the world

AN EVENTFUL WORLD

After completing a couple of raids and leveling up Eivor, I'm ready to attack Rued's stronghold and end his tyranny. However, along the way, I run into a group of farmers who thank me for establishing law and order in the land. They offer to join my assault on Rued's camp and then march off to prepare for battle. This is not a required encounter, and some players might miss this meeting, which means they'll have a smaller army in the battle to come.

My encounter with the farmers is a perfect example of Ubisoft's new approach to side content, which now feels more organic. Instead of traditional side quests, Ubisoft has crafted a number of encounters it calls "world events." These short sequences don't appear on your map, but usually involve talking to an NPC and sometimes ask you to complete a simple task. World events offer short bits of narrative that flesh out the world and sometimes reward players with various resources or new companions. During one world event, I helped a young boy catch a cat. This cat then joined my crew, and I could see my new pet cuddled up under my feet whenever I boarded my longship.

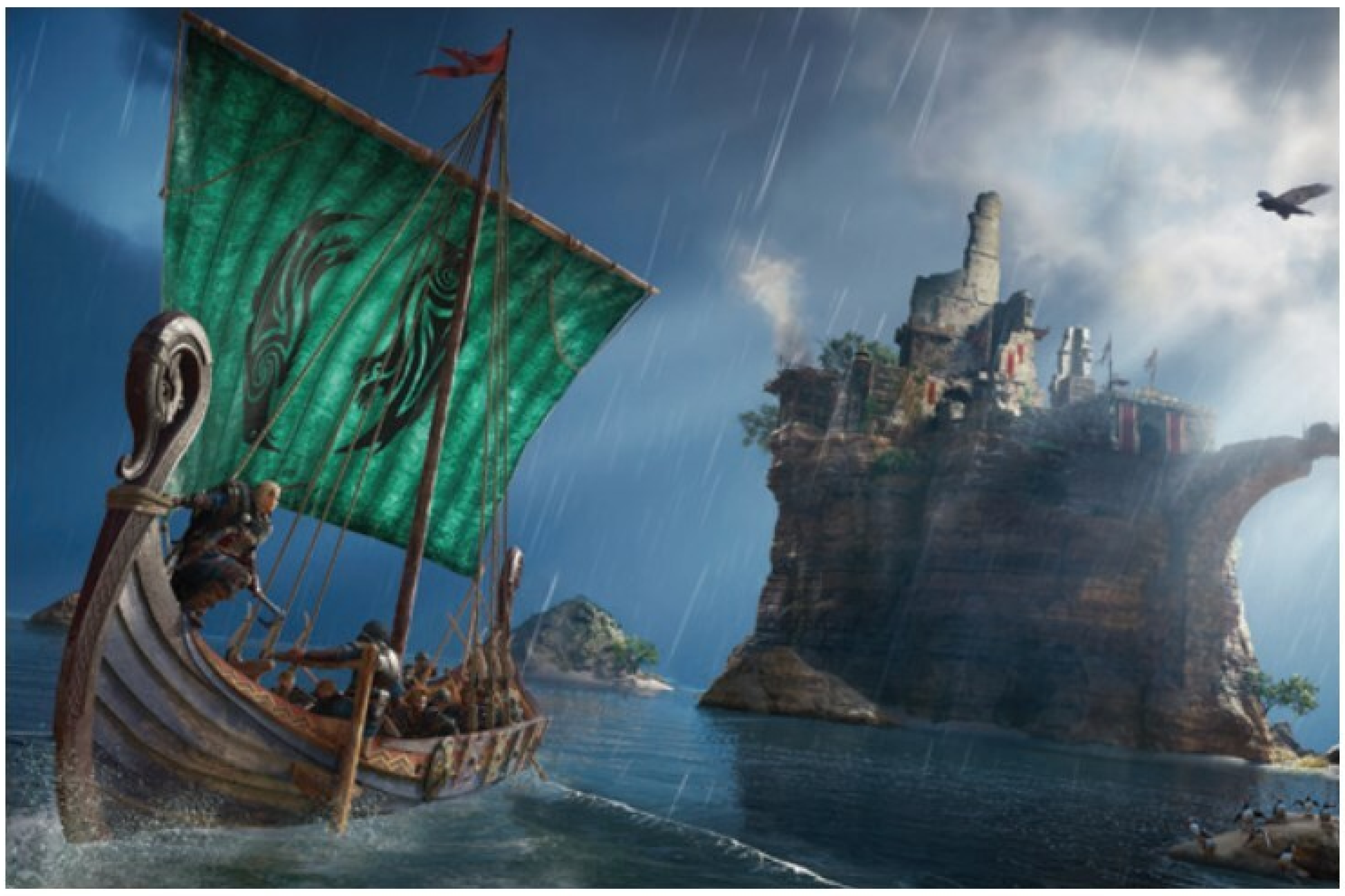
"We don't have this idea of like one main path and 100 side quests," McDevitt says. "We actually have just a bunch of really epic feature-length film stories through the main campaign, and the concept of a side quest is almost absent from our game. In its place, we filled the world with little events. We don't call them side quests, because a quest makes it feel like it's part of Eivor's main motivation. We've really jumbled up the box of what we do with quests. Valhalla has the same amount of narrative content as a lot of other games, but it's organized in a completely different way."

In addition to world events, Valhalla's world is rich with various collectibles and secrets. At any point, Eivor can call down their pet raven to scout the environment. As with the last couple Assassin's Creed titles, your bird highlights various points of interest, making it easy to find resources you need to upgrade your gear, tag enemies, or discover rare valuables.

WHAT'S HAPPENING DURING THE MODERN DAY?

Assassin's Creed Valhalla continues the modern-day story featuring Layla Hassan, who was introduced in Origins. Layla remains on a quest to seek out Pieces of Eden, which are ancient artifacts of great power that once belonged to a highly advanced race known as the Isu.

"Layla is going into the memories of Eivor for a specific reason, which I can't reveal, but I think we've managed to make some forward momentum in this story that will leave people very, very satisfied," says narrative director Darby McDevitt. "We have a fitting resolution to this specific story that I think will satisfy people while also get them asking, 'Oh, what comes next? Where does this continue?'"



SETTING SAIL

As with several other entries in the Assassin's Creed series, Eivor has a ship, which they can use to traverse England's various waterways. We didn't experience naval combat or explore how you might upgrade this longship, but the vessel is useful for quickly traveling across the countryside. During your travels, you also listen to your crew sing Viking raid songs, or you can ask your crew to tell you a story.

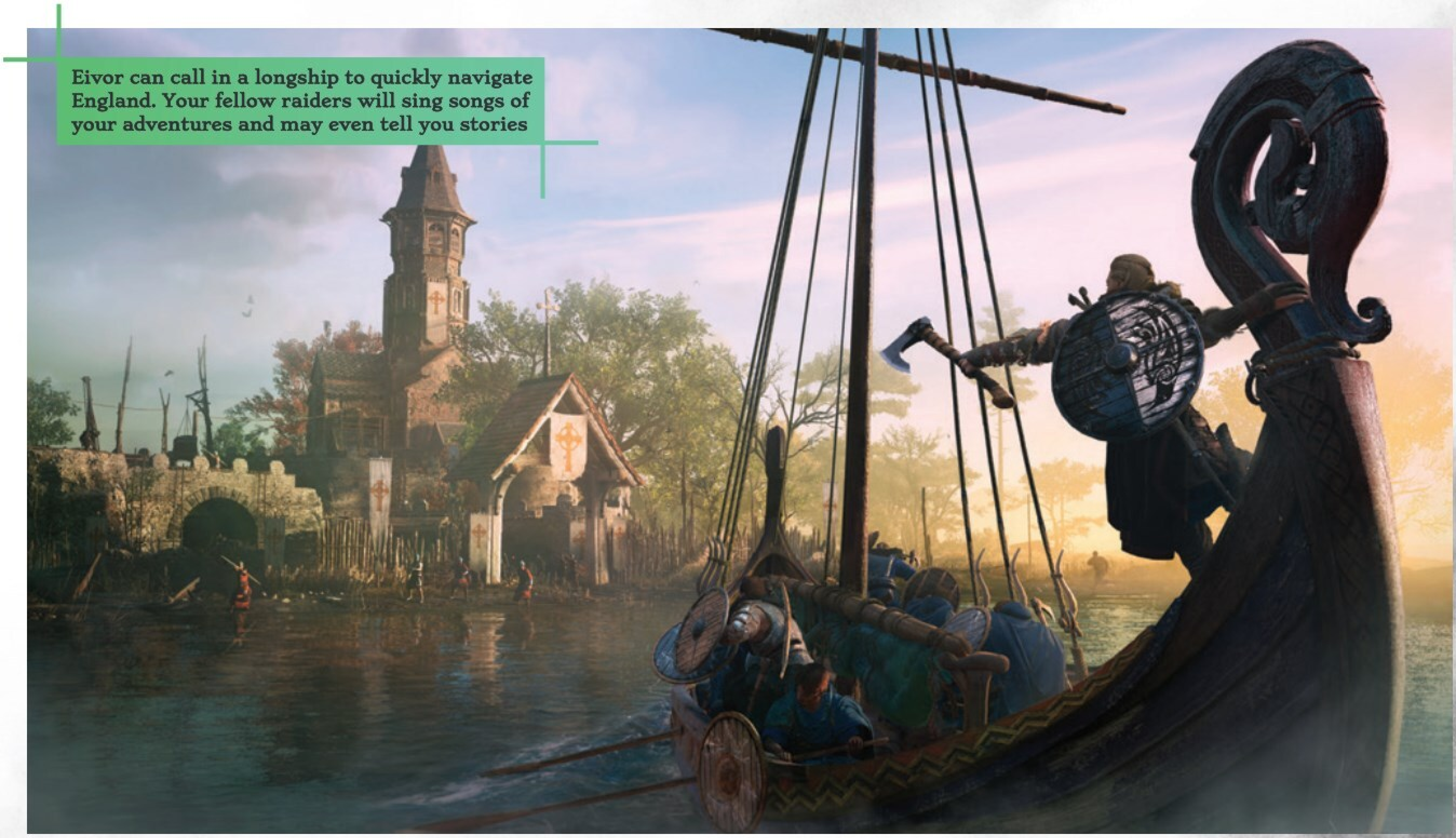
MAKING NEW ALLIANCES

"No more distractions," I tell myself. Rued needs to pay. So, I march my army up to the front gates of his castle and begin the assault. As with my previous raids, this assault is an all-out bloodbath, but once Eivor finally confronts Rued, I'm faced with a moral choice: Do I take Rued as a prisoner so he can be tried properly for his crimes, or do I take justice into my own hands and execute him on the spot? Choices like these impact your experience. If Eivor kills Rued, some of our friends might be unhappy. But if we let Rued live, he could escape and seek revenge down the road.

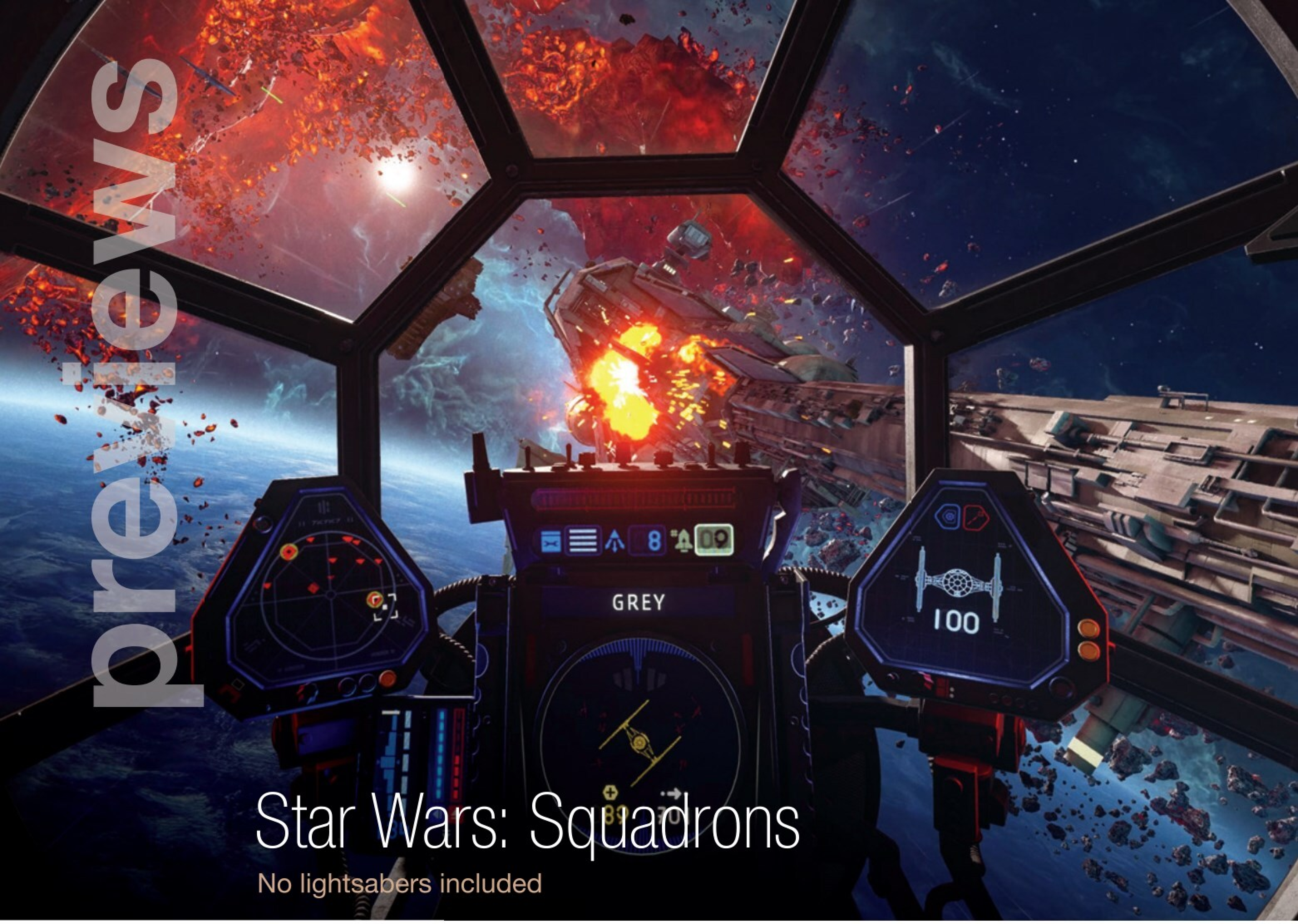
"In every major story arc, we want there to be at least one major choice," McDevitt says. "Those choices actually have ramifications down the road because you have these alliances that you've made. Those relationships need to be good for something, so at certain points in the story, you might have to call on those alliances. You'll see those friendly faces again – or some of them, anyway."

When it comes to Rued and his clan, you'll have to wait until Assassin's Creed Valhalla launches on November 17 to experiences the full fruits of Eivor's alliances, but our time with Ubisoft's latest open-world RPG left us excited for the full journey. Fans of Assassin's Creed Origins and Odyssey likely already know what to expect from Valhalla, but Ubisoft has refined its formula and crafted another massive sandbox that looks to deliver on the Viking fantasy.

"You don't have to say much more than Viking to get people dreaming," McDevitt says. "But it's our job to disabuse you of some of those dreams. Like, Vikings didn't wear horned helmets, and even though they have a reputation for ferociousness, they were also settlers and explorers. They came to England not to colonize England, but to settle down because they needed land … We want to go to the source and drag up all of the historical details and give you a complete Viking experience. It's not just the big axes and the longship. Although that stuff is fun, too." ◈



Eivor can call in a longship to quickly navigate England. Your fellow raiders will sing songs of your adventures and may even tell you stories



Star Wars: Squadrons

No lightsabers included

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC
» **Style**
1-Player Action
(10-Player Online)
» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts
» **Developer**
Motive Studios
» **Release**
October 2

The millions of voices that cried out for a new X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter game were suddenly silenced when Electronic Arts announced Star Wars: Squadrons, a space combat game that delivers a single-player campaign and 5v5 multiplayer. The entire experience is confined to the cockpit of some of Star Wars' most iconic ships. You can pilot a TIE Interceptor and get locked in battle against an A-Wing in an asteroid field, and arm a Y-Wing's bombs to drop on an Imperial Star Destroyer.

For the single-player experience, developer Motive Studios is working with Lucasfilm and Disney to create a new canonical story that follows two pilots: one flying for the Rebellion, and the other the Empire. The viewpoint changes after each mission, and provides an intimate look at the inner-workings, conflicts, and hopes of both sides. Don't expect to see action figures of these pilots hitting stores any time soon; both are created by you. You pick their species, gender, outfit, voice, and more.

The story begins within the framework of *A New Hope*, and offers a new perspective on the events that transpired after Alderaan was obliterated by the Death Star. This prologue provides two missions – one for each faction – and sets up the core story and relationships that pick up three years later after the Battle of Endor and the Empire's fall. You still play as your same two created characters after the time jump, and learn how they've settled into their roles on both sides.

As you progress through the story, battles unfold in the debris of a shattered moon near Galitan and within the icy ring of Essles. You also return to Yavin Prime, but are closer to its gas giant. All of these maps are restricted to space and planets' atmospheres. You won't be able to reach terrestrial areas, meaning you don't have to worry about crashing into a mountain. The same cannot be said for asteroids or giant capital-class ships that you skim dangerously along.

These locations are also featured in Squadrons' 5v5 multiplayer modes. If you just want a quick aerial encounter, Dogfight Mode allows you to take on another team with the victory determined by kill count. The signature multiplayer mode is called Fleet Battles. True to its name, your squadron of five ships is just a small fraction of the Empire or Rebellion's forces. As you soar out of a hangar bay into darkened space, green and red laser fire rips from every which way, A.I. controlled ships engage in battle, and giant flagships move into position to cripple the opposing side. Each Fleet Battle delivers the scale and intensity of the space sequence from *Return of the Jedi*'s Battle of Endor. The goal of this mode is to be the first team to drop a flagship. To accomplish this, you need to push the frontline, break down their defenses, and create a path for your bombers to reach the Star Destroyer or MC75. Once the flagship is exposed, you attempt to take down its shield generators, and power and targeting systems.

Most space combat games allow players to view the action from both first- and third-person perspectives, but not Squadrons; you are locked into the cockpit and won't be able to view your ship's exterior unless it's in a hangar. It was an easy decision for Motive to make, since the entire heads-up display that players use to monitor the battle is baked into the ship's cockpit. One meter is dedicated to shields, another gives you your ammo count, and you even have the basic and somewhat junky red or green targeting display seen in the films.

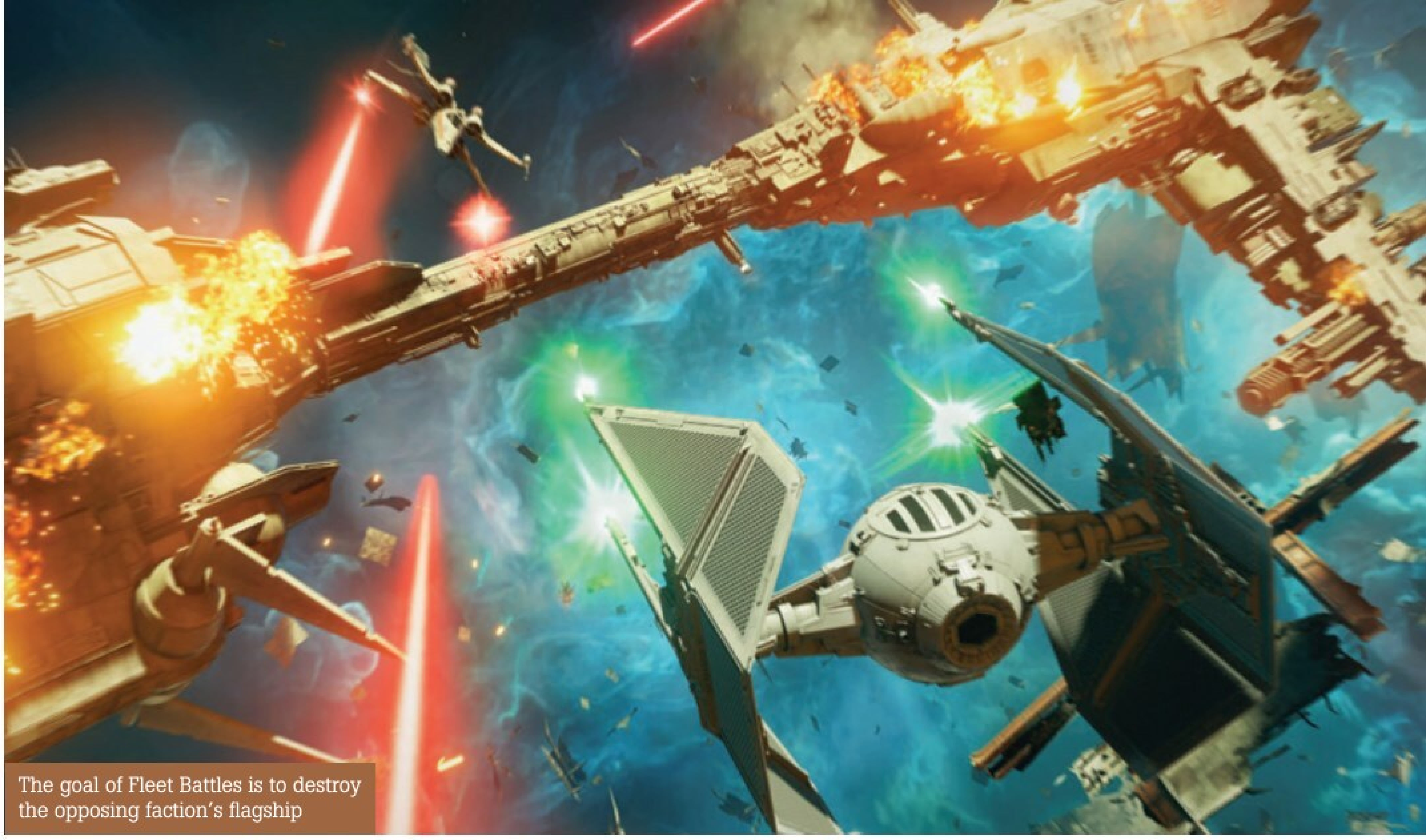
The X-Wing functions like you would expect, but you don't have to leave it in its factory settings. You can unlock over 50 different components that alter how your ship flies, fights, and survives. You also earn currency and rewards that allow you to customize your ships exterior and interior, such as putting an Ewok bobblehead next to your map display. The one thing you can't customize is which droid flies with you – you have the same one every time.

When you enter a multiplayer battle, your first step toward success occurs before you even take off. Coordinating with your teammates is key. You want to determine who is using what type of gear, what their roles are, and what ship they are flying. Each ship type performs differently. On the Republic's side, the iconic X-Wing is front and center and is a part of Star Wars: Squadrons' "fighter" class, which is the most versatile class. The X-Wing is well-balanced in firepower and toughness. The A-Wing falls into the "interceptor" class, which are lightning quick and can maneuver through tight spaces. The A-Wing is a great choice for hunting down rival craft. The U-Wing, which debuted in *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, is the support class, delivering plenty of toughness, and according to the trailer, can keep allies "safe and stocked up." The Y-Wing is the heavily armored bomber most effective against enemy flagships.

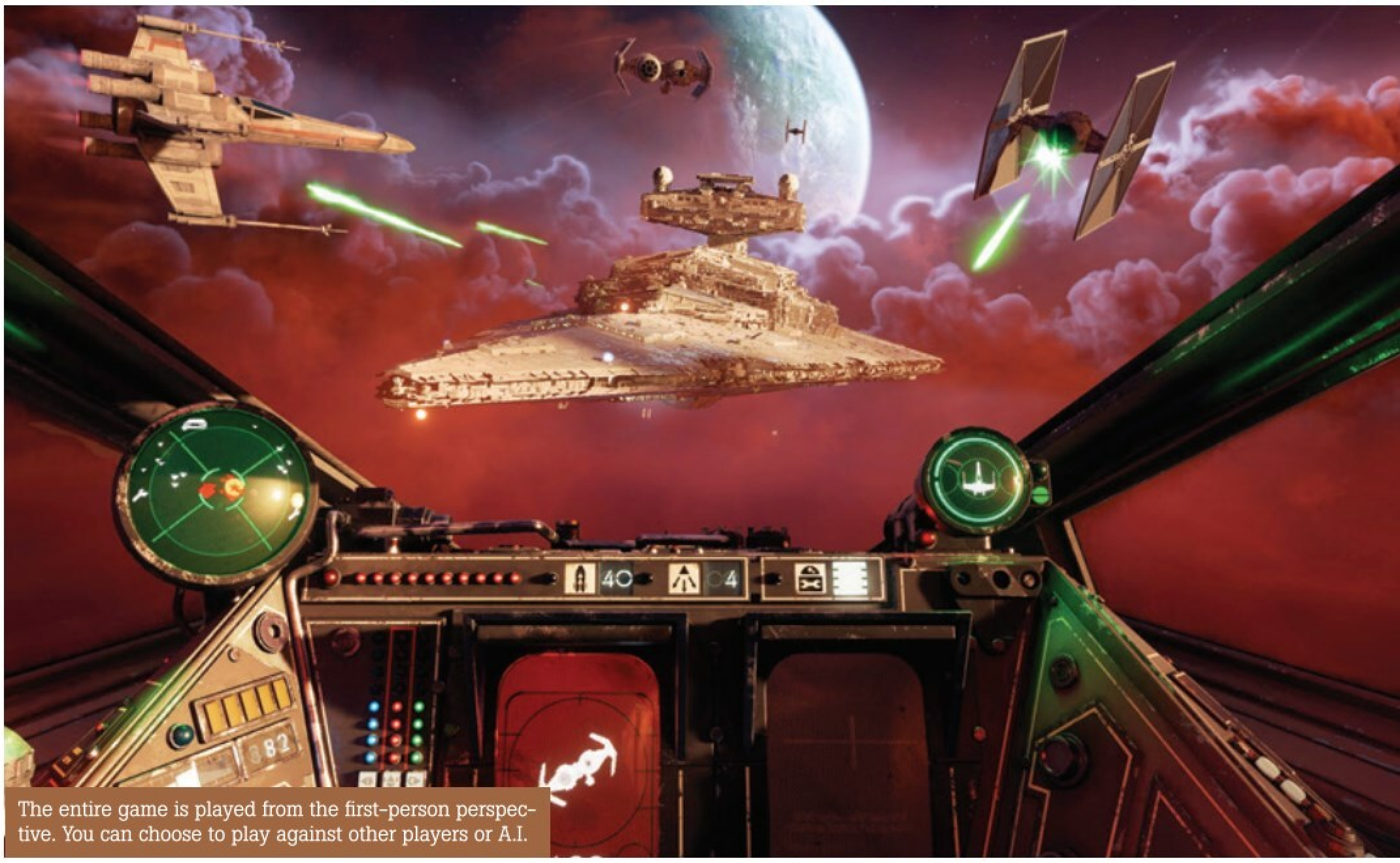
For the Empire, the traditional TIE Fighter falls into the fighter class and is balanced similarly to the Republic's X-Wing, but has the edge in speed. True to its name, the TIE Interceptor is the Empire's interceptor-class option. The TIE Reaper, which is traditionally used to transport troops, is the Empire's support-class choice. The TIE Bomber is slow, but delivers plenty of firepower and fits into the bomber class.

Squadrons offers crossplay support, allowing Xbox One, PlayStation 4, and PC players to play together. On top of this, PC and PlayStation VR are supported, as are hands-on-throttle-and-stick rigs for PC players. If you like the idea of battles, but don't want to fight against real players, you can take on A.I. opponents instead, but you will see a reduction in experience points and currency awarded.

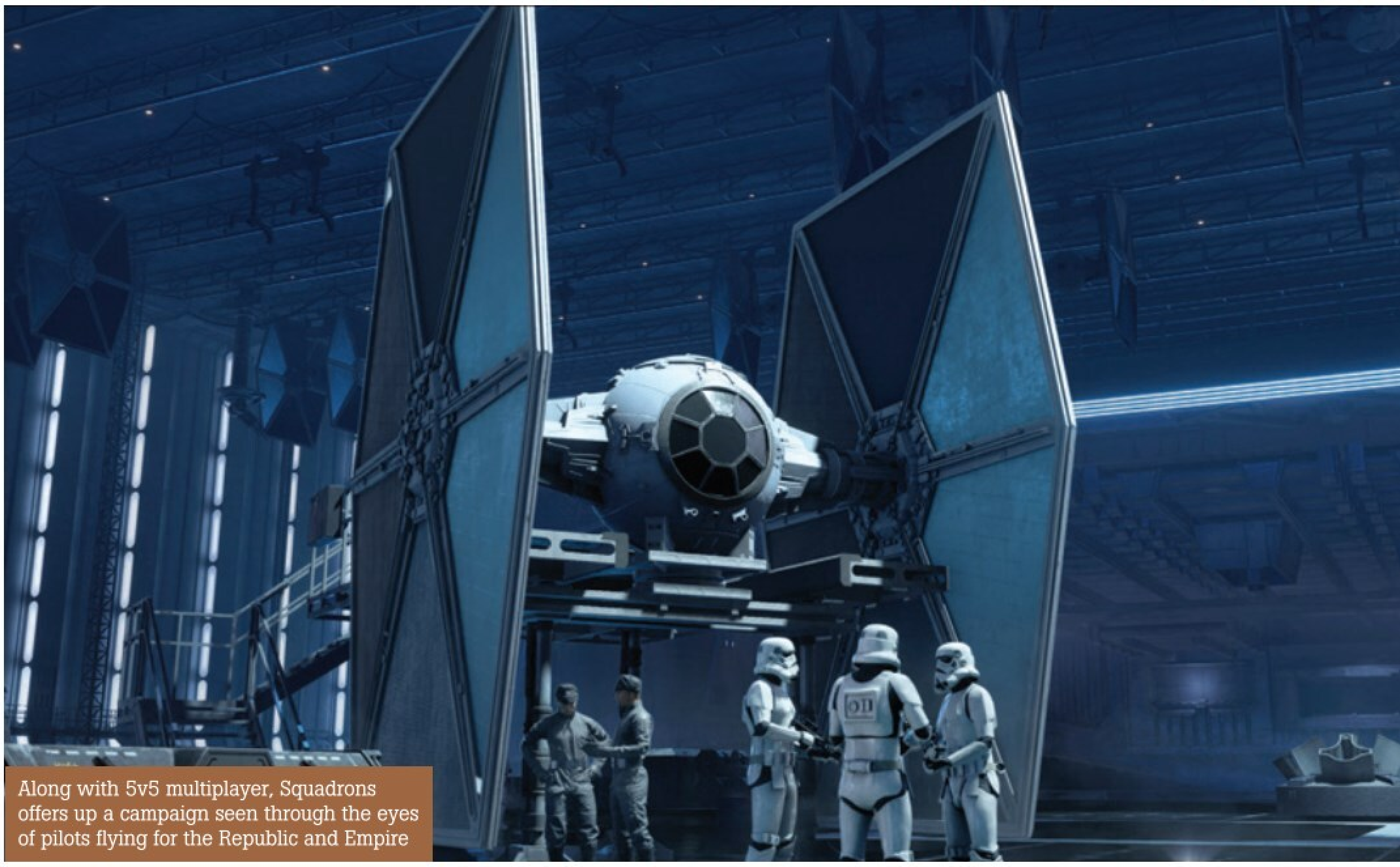
Motive Studios has no current plans to turn Squadrons into a live-service game. All of the content that you can unlock and engage with is available on day one. You have to unlock the majority of it through play, but no DLC or microtransactions are planned.
» **Andrew Reiner**



The goal of Fleet Battles is to destroy the opposing faction's flagship



The entire game is played from the first-person perspective. You can choose to play against other players or A.I.



Along with 5v5 multiplayer, Squadrons offers up a campaign seen through the eyes of pilots flying for the Republic and Empire

Far Cry 6

Starting a revolution

» **Platform**
PS5 • Xbox Series X
PS4 • Xbox One
Stadia • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Toronto

» **Release**
February 18

The Far Cry series has taken us all over the globe, from the breathtaking Himalayas to the great plains of Montana. Each entry presents a warped leader, hellbent on eliminating all threats to them – including you. We've faced everything from tyrannical kings to pirate lords, and even an over-zealous cult leader in Ubisoft's open-world playgrounds. Ubisoft recently unveiled Far Cry 6, revealing the next locale and antagonist with an intense trailer centered on a ruthless dictator and his son. This time around, you lead a guerilla revolution, fighting to free the fictional island nation of Yara. We sat down with narrative director Navid Khavari to learn more about this world and the different tensions at play within it.

Yara is located in the heart of the Caribbean, housing lush jungles, dense cities, and beautiful beaches. However, the island has seen better days; decades of economic sanctions have left the island impoverished, and as a result, its citizens divided. The man tasked with returning this struggling island to its former glory is Antón Castillo, played by Giancarlo Esposito (*Breaking Bad*, *The Mandalorian*). As El Presidente of Yara, Antón has kept the country under his tight control, often resorting to brutal methods to achieve what he thinks is the greater good. "When he's elected to power, he does so on the promise to rebuild paradise, to bring Yara back to the money it had 50 years ago," Khavari explains. "But what he doesn't say is that that paradise isn't for everyone, that those who dare speak out against his methods will be rounded up into essentially a forced labor state, one that is forced to work at gunpoint to see his vision of the country."

Castillo also may have a bit of an ax to grind. See, 50 years ago, a revolution took place on the island when Castillo's father was in charge. The revolution succeeded, and his father was executed right before his eyes. "The touchstone for us was having this character who was born amidst revolution and developed a very twisted worldview after the execution of his father, but also someone who is a father himself," Khavari says.

As seen in the trailer, Castillo is trying to groom his teenage son, Diego, to succeed him. "What I can say is that with Diego what we found really interesting was this idea of, 'This is a 13-year-old teenager.' I think a lot of folks can remember what it was like being 13 – at least I do," Khavari says. "It's hard enough to figure out who you are and what you're gonna do in this world and what does it all mean? But try doing that while also being the son of a dictator who is running a country. We really wanted to create a character in Diego that is riding a razor's edge – that you don't know exactly where he's going to land. Is he going to follow in his father's footsteps? Is he going to be a brutal dictator himself? Or is he going to forge his own journey, his own path?"

So where do you come in in all of this? You play as Dani Rojos, who you can choose to be male or female, and Ubisoft says the trio of Dani, Diego, and Antón will be crucial to the game. "In terms of Dani, what we wanted to do was explore a character that is fully voiced, fully performance captured and you can play as both male and female," Khavari says. "We also wanted a character that was born and raised on the island of Yara, is a local, and someone who didn't necessarily see themselves as part of a revolution or an uprising, but who gets swept up in the Libertad movement."

Ubisoft isn't ready to talk about gameplay until a later date, but said that because its inhabitants have had to make do with what's on the

ATTENTION: EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY
MARTIAL LAW
AREA CLOSED
PENDING INVESTIGATION
ATENCIÓN: EFECTIVA INMEDIATAMENTE
LEY MARCIAL
ZONA CERRADA
INVESTIGACIÓN PENDIENTE

It's up you as the main character to start a revolution and stand up for what's right

island, players can anticipate some unconventional weapons and new vehicles. When asked how Far Cry 6 will offer something different for players, Khavari said to expect plenty of verticality that would change the way you play. For a first in the series, Yara houses a sprawling capital city, Esperanza. You can navigate the area more stealthily or go guns blazing in firefights through the streets. "When you have a city, there's definitely verticality involved … and you really get the sense of a revolution," Khavari says. "Because a guerrilla revolution usually starts in the jungles and in the farmlands, but you sort of circle and approach Antón. And when you attack a city, you feel the weight of oppression, just in the scale of the buildings, being able to navigate rooftops and alleys. It not only changes the way you play, but it changes how the narrative feels."

It was also revealed that Ubisoft's popular "Guns for Hire" mechanic from Far Cry 5 is returning. This time around, it's called Amigos for Hire, where you can pair up with A.I. companions to help you. From a jaded ex-KGB spy to an adorable wiener dog, you have a variety of options for backup. Ubisoft wouldn't get into any other specifics for companions, but according to Khavari, wiener dog Chorizo is the favorite among the dev team. "I can say maybe as a little tease, he kills with kindness, so I'm excited for people to experience that."

While Antón Castillo and son Diego look to have an intriguing dynamic, time will tell if Ubisoft can infuse that into the story in a meaningful way. Most importantly, the Far Cry series has been in need of new lifeblood in terms of gameplay, and that's still the biggest unknown right now. One thing we do know is that players who purchase the game on PlayStation 4 or Xbox One will get a free next-gen upgrade on PlayStation 5 or Xbox Series X when the game is released on those platforms. » **Kimberley Wallace**

The team at Ubisoft visited Cuba and chatted with guerillas who fought in the revolution there for inspiration

Far Cry has been pretty formulaic through the years, but Ubisoft said to expect some surprises in how you approach situations

Microsoft Flight Simulator

Flying high again

» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC
» **Style**
Online Multiplayer Simulation
» **Publisher**
Xbox Game Studios
» **Developer**
Asobo Studio
» **Release**
August 18 (PC),
TBA (Xbox One)

As Microsoft's longest-running software franchise, Flight Simulator has accrued a dedicated following of those wanting to take to the sky in a realistic way. With the most recent entry launching in 2006, the technological leaps forward in the new edition are staggering. Not only has developer Asobo Studio mapped the entire world, but the team's attention to detail even has those of us with no interest in aviation keeping our eyes on this title.

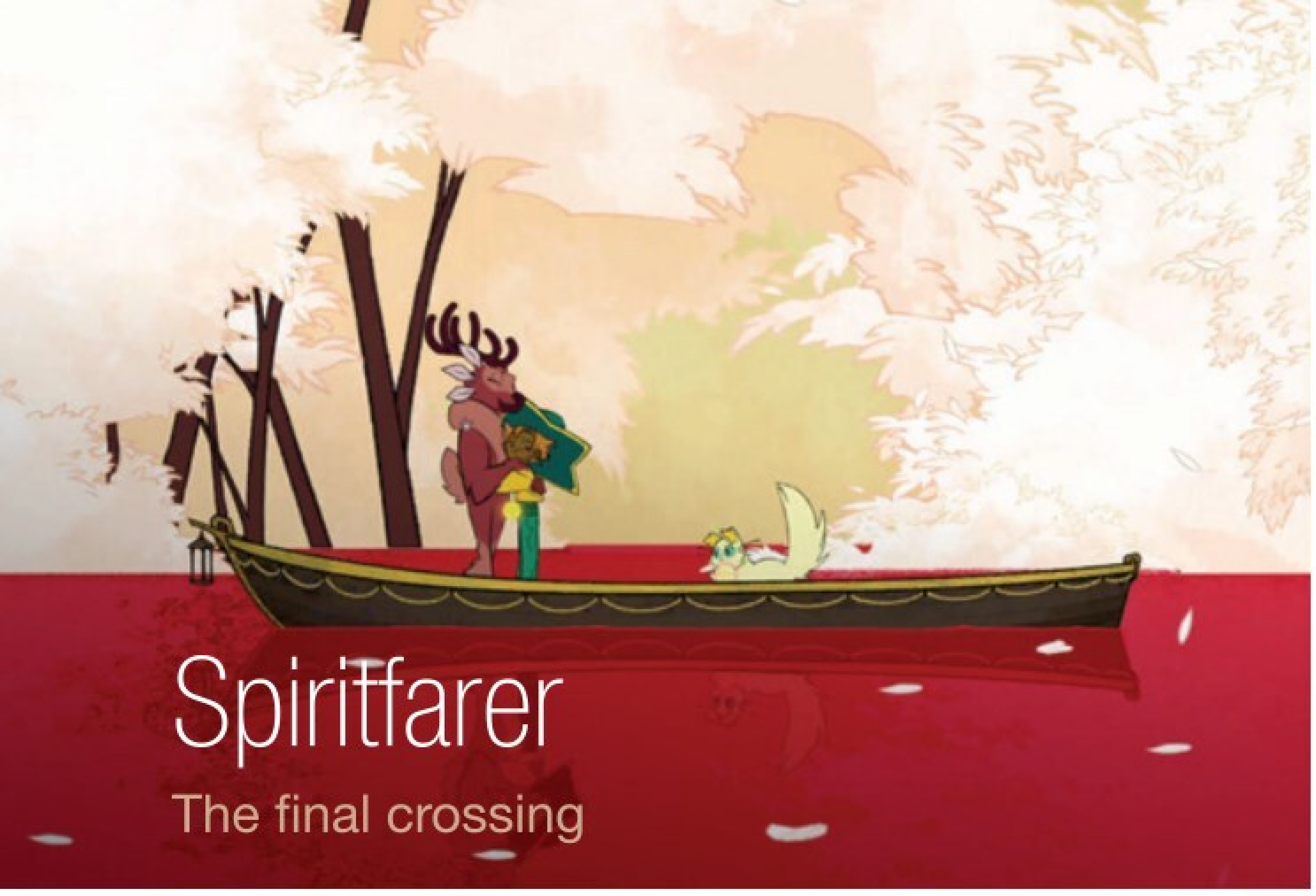
You can visit any city or town on Earth, and Asobo went the extra step and rendered 400 of the world's cities with Bing Maps' telemetry to add an absurd amount of detail. Additionally, the team handcrafted up to 30 airports (depending on which version you buy), with the other 37,000 airports available via automatic generation through the mapping of the planet. In fact, the planet is so vast that it could take 14 years of continuous flight to see everything in the game. All this data would be too much for anyone to download, so Microsoft streams it to players using its Azure cloud technology. If you have a slow connection or plan on being without internet access, don't worry; you can download parts of the world.

Once you're in the sky, the world looks stunning. This is not just due to the photorealistic nature of things on the ground, but also thanks to three-dimensional clouds and rain that accurately scatter light, realistic water reflections, and intricately detailed lighting in cities and suburbs. Perhaps most impressive, you can set the weather to whatever you want, or you can pull in the current weather in that specific location in real-time.

Whether you're soaring through clear skies, braving a nearby thunderstorm, or dealing with deteriorating snowy conditions, the faithful aviation experience is at the heart of Microsoft Flight Simulator. Using advanced aerodynamics calculations, the software ensures you deal with the various elements and variables that real pilots must take into account every day. From a hot day producing added updraft to a realistic simulation of air mass changing how your plane handles under different conditions, Asobo has left no box unchecked when compiling the data for an accurate simulation; the studio even went so far as to calculate how the air coming out of the propeller hits the tail of the plane.

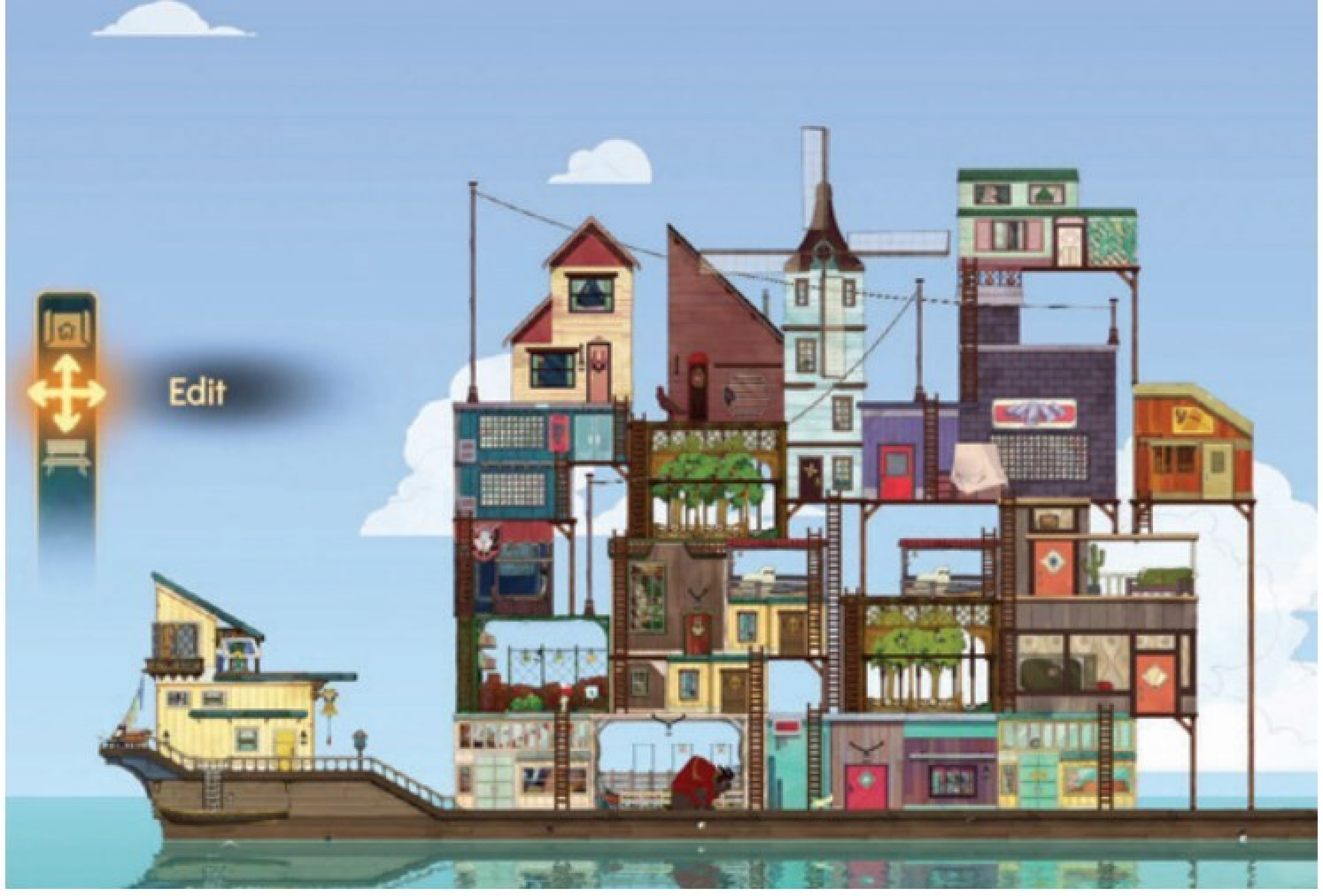
While Microsoft Flight Simulator is already impressive, Asobo has grand ambitions for the post-launch product. The current plan is to release something significant every single month going forward; these updates could include free world additions such as more handcrafted airports and landing challenges, new simulation features, and paid DLC for things like adding helicopters to the software.

With so much impressive technology behind it, Flight Simulator could be the strongest case yet for the power of Microsoft's Azure cloud technology. If this software is truly able to stream the entire planet, complete with live weather, dynamic elements, and accurate flight simulation to anyone with a decent internet connection, Microsoft's latest Flight Simulator could take the franchise to new heights. » **Brian Shea**



Spiritfarer

The final crossing



Some people think of death as an ending, while others view it as a beginning. Spiritfarer explores the latter scenario, putting you on a boat full of deceased spirits to befriend as you ferry them to the next phase of their existence. I've been intrigued by this narrative-driven simulation since it was first revealed last year, but after playing it for myself, I'm even more excited to set sail with the final version.

I take control of ferrymaster Stella, while creative director Nicolas Guérin controls Stella's cat, Daffodil. Spiritfarer can be played solo or co-op, but if you team up, both players can interact with the environment and access a shared inventory. I explore the boat, admiring its sprawling town-like quality; multiple levels of structures are built on top of each other, and they all have specific purposes. Some are for growing vegetables, some are for crafting, and some are homes for the various spirits who have favors to ask.

Guérin has jumped me to a point about 30 hours into the game, so this represents a well-developed boat. Stella and Daffodil don't start with all these amenities; players progress gradually by exploring islands, gathering resources, and completing requests from spirit friends. The gameplay structure is similar to farming sims like Harvest Moon and Stardew Valley, but with defined arcs for the characters and the main story. After Stella completes a spirit's requests, that spirit is ready to move on – and once they enter the afterlife, they leave your boat for good. I witness the final goodbye of a spirit named Gwen, and though I won't spoil the specifics, Stella clearly helped Gwen gain some perspective on her life and how to approach whatever comes beyond it.

From my brief demo, Spiritfarer's themes seem sad and complex. However, they are wrapped in colorful visuals and striking animation, emphasizing the notion that death needn't always be dark and dramatic. In this game, death is surrounded by a cozy aesthetic, friendly faces, and a curiosity about what comes next. » **Joe Juba**

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • Stadia • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Simulation
(2-Player Online)

» Publisher
Thunder Lotus Games

» Developer
Thunder Lotus Games

» Release
Fall

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Hyper Scape

Shooting for the stars

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
100-Player
Online Shooter

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Montreal

» Release
August 11

The battle-royale arena is fierce these days, with big combatants like Warzone, Fortnite, and Apex Legends threatening to stamp out newcomers before they can grab a weapon to swing back. But Ubisoft's newest entry to the massive genre, Hyper Scape, takes some different approaches to the classic template that might give it a chance to swim with the sharks.

Ubisoft is targeting the streamer/viewer ecosystem in a big way with Hyper Scape. Using a Twitch extension, viewers get frequent vote prompts to add significant effects to the game they're watching. Want to pump in some low-gravity madness? How about unlimited ammo? Is your favorite streamer hurt from a scrap and trying desperately to survive? Vote for health packs! Viewers that opt in can also find themselves pulled in to play with the streamer via the extension; there's no big ordeal to add people on Discord to get the experience rolling. Finally, you can earn credit toward your battle pass and season goals from watching as well, wrapping up the loop of streamer/viewer integration. It's a bold new world out there for watchability in games, and these kinds of interactions certainly boost the game's potential to take off.

Other differences are subtle but highly significant. If you're downed, you continue to exist as a ghost, fully able to walk around the world and communicate enemy movements and positions to your teammates. This is relevant because should a player go down, they form a resurrection point that you can hop into and your teammates can revive you. This means that a good team could come back to life multiple times over the course of a match through effective communication and gameplay, leading to clutch moments, big comebacks, and tense team fights.

Armaments are simple but elegant. You can hold two weapons and two abilities at any given time, forcing you to make choices as you sort through piles of loot. Picking up additional copies of weapons and abilities enhances them up to "golden" rank, which are much more powerful than their lower-tier counterparts. For example, a sniper rifle might get additional magazine capacity, power, and effective range from grabbing additional copies. An ability could gain cooldown reduction, duration, and strength. One of the coolest abilities in the game is one that plays up Hyper Scape's willingness to explore vertical space more than other battle royales: the ball. It's an armored bouncy ball that envelops you, providing protection and the ability to do some mad bouncing around. When you find a good spot in the air, you can pop out of the ball and begin blasting at your bewildered opponents.

Battle royales entering the market today face an uphill battle, but Ubisoft may have the ingredients to work with here to transform it into a competitor in an ever-growing roster of combatants. Hyper Scape is available on PC now in open beta, with a wide release coming to PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC this summer. » **Daniel Tack**

Kingdom Hearts Melody Of Memory

Magical songs of reflection

Music has always been an integral part of Kingdom Hearts. Iconic songs like "Dearly Beloved" have become core to the series' identity alongside poignant character themes for Kairi, Ventus, and Xion. Between acclaimed composer Yoko Shimomura's masterful work adding personality and emotion to every situation and Utada Hiraku's vocals breathing life into theme songs like "Simple and Clean" and "My Sanctuary," the melodies have always turned heads and captivated audiences. Now Kingdom Hearts' rich musical library is getting top billing, with an entire rhythm game devoted to it.

This isn't the first time Square Enix has capitalized on its powerful flagship franchises' soundtracks; its beloved Theatrhythm series focused on Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest. So far it looks like Kingdom Hearts Melody of Memory is taking plenty of cues in terms of gameplay and presentation, but it isn't receiving the Theatrhythm moniker.

Kingdom Hearts Melody of Memory boasts more than 140 tracks from the series and over 20 characters. Square Enix said it will allow players "to relive their favorite moments like never before." Details are still sparse, but trailers showcased iconic characters, such as Sora, Donald, and Goofy, traversing various Disney worlds and fighting to the melodies with the help of popular heroes like Hercules and Aladdin. Expect intense boss battles, and to even take control of the gummi ship. The tunes span the series' unique tracks alongside ones from Disney's cinematic classics.

In addition to a single-player mode, the game will also have online multiplayer to take on greater challenges with friends. The trailer said there would be four modes in total, but didn't give specifics on the others.

Square Enix left one last tease in its reveal; the trailer ended showing that the game will have a connection to the main plot, specifically to Kairi and her arc concerning the final events of Kingdom Hearts III. Time will tell how substantial that is, but at the very least we know we'll have some good music to keep us company along the way.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

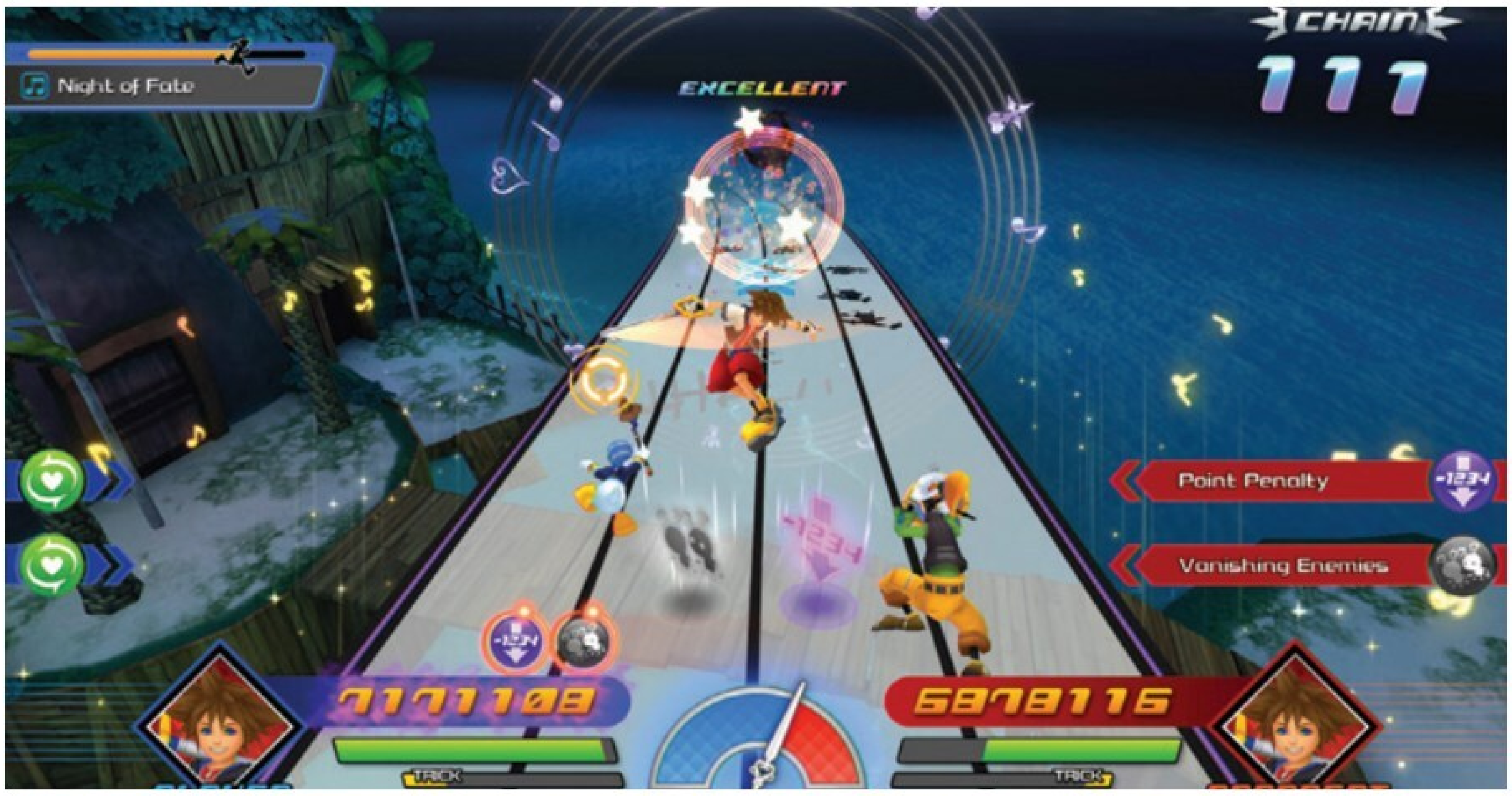
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch

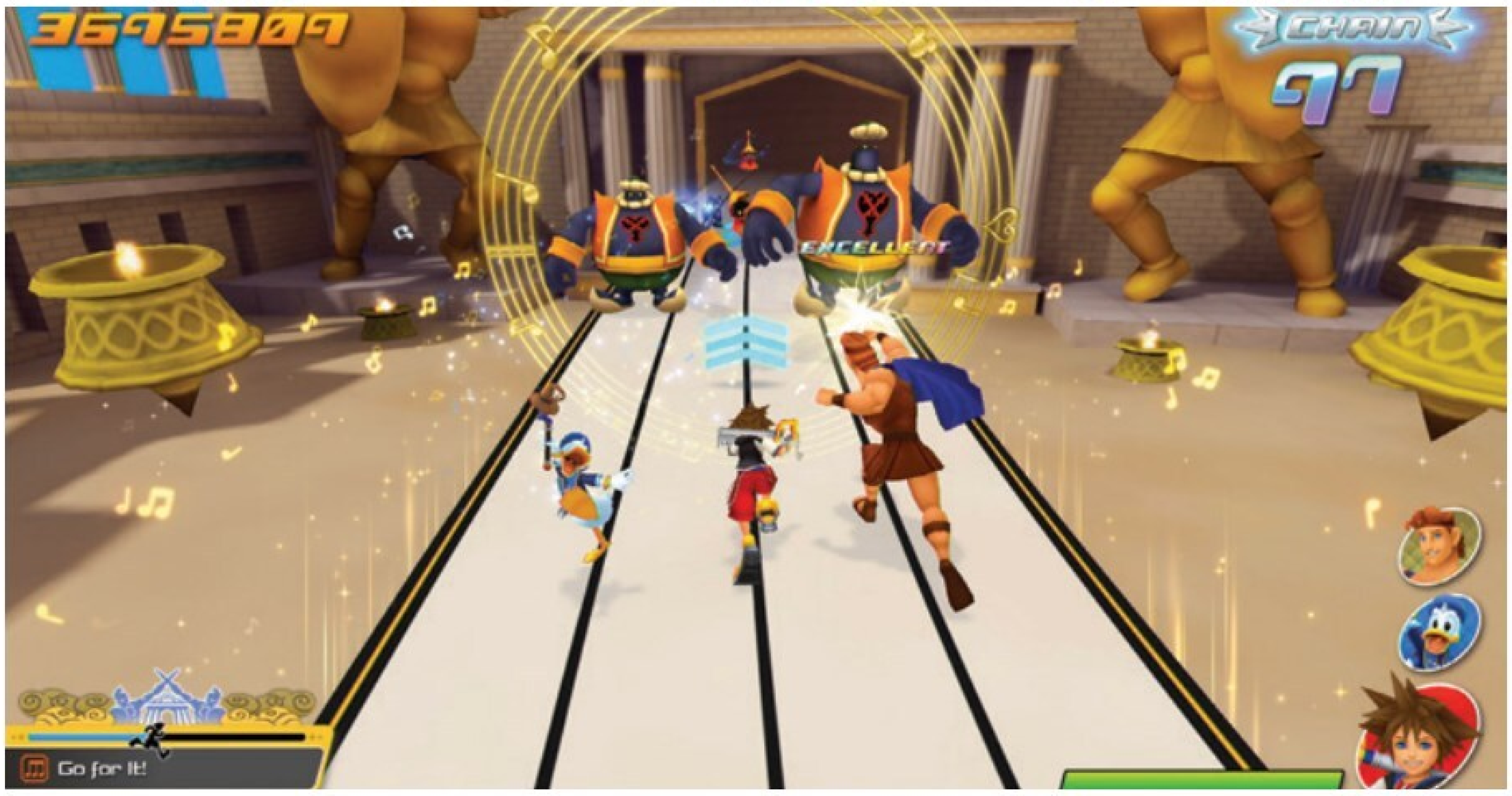
» **Style**
1-Player
Music/Rhythm

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
2020





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World Of Warcraft: Shadowlands

Exploring the Azerothian afterlife

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
MMORPG

» **Publisher**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Release**
TBA

While we still don't have a release date for World of Warcraft: Shadowlands, we expect to be exploring the afterlife and meeting with many long-lost friends and foes sometime this fall. In some recent game sessions, I had a chance to explore some aspects of the game that MMORPG enthusiasts tend to care about the most – the ever evolving "endgame."

Everything leading up to the level 60 endgame in Shadowlands is important, but once you're there the game really begins. Your journey from 50 to 60 takes you through four major zones and factions, one of which you must choose to ally with to take on your endgame identity. Your decision comes with immediate and long-term rewards, including a mount, covenant hall, transmogrifications for cosmetic flair, functional and flavorful covenant abilities, and various progression routes. You also get to take on story content that's only available to that specific faction as you work through campaigns tailored for max-level characters.

With all that in mind, there are two big activities for players to engage in at the top, alongside all the usual dungeon and raid delving. The Maw is the Shadowlands' equivalent to hell, and there is little solace for players there. It's a desolate place filled with incredibly dangerous enemies and environmental challenges, without any inns, mount capability, or much hope of long-term survival. The longer you stick around in The Maw and complete activities, the more the eye of the Jailer (The Shadowlands' primary antagonist) will pay attention to you, like the Eye of Sauron finding a victim in the wastes of Mordor. As you balance the risk/reward of careful exploration, eventually you face harder and harder threats until you can no longer withstand them. It's a fun way to bring back danger to a game that has lacked the feeling of an oppressive, challenging exterior zone for a long while.

The other major element is Torghast. This dungeon continually changes and shifts, making it a new experience every time you enter, solo or with friends. This dungeon run is unlike any other in World of Warcraft, as you try to "break the game" on each and every attempt by selecting and stacking abilities obtained from drops and loot chests. Taking on mini-bosses, floor bosses, tackling puzzles, and managing debuffs should provide a new and varied experience day after day, week after week, as players pursue legendary crafted gear. Torghast seeks to add variety and variance to the dungeon experience, because no matter how good the dungeon is, they can get old after a month or two of pulling the same packs and bosses over and over. » **Daniel Tack**

Fuser

Hitting the festival scene

Anyone with even a passing knowledge of the music genre is familiar with Harmonix, or at least one of the studio's many games. The developer has been synonymous with music-gaming experiences for decades, and consistently reinvents itself with new perspectives on the always-changing world of popular tunes.

The studio's latest effort is Fuser, a game that targets the festival music scene – in particular the music-mixing DJ culture that helps define that experience for fans. In its gameplay, Fuser allows players to draw individual parts of a bunch of different songs – including vocals, guitars, drums, and more – and add them into a growing mix. Thanks to some remarkable technology behind the scenes, the music that results manages to sound great, like it was meant to go together, no matter which songs you select.

In hands-on time with an early build, I was impressed with both the breadth of music styles, and the ease with which the game allows players to be creative. The 30-plus announced songs thus far include everything from Dua Lipa and Billie Eilish to Warren G and Brad Paisley. If you're trying to imagine how those four artists would sound squeezed into an interconnected music number, this is the game for you. The final set list is planned to include over 100 songs, and that's before Harmonix's inevitable addition of DLC tracks.

While an objective-focused campaign exists to carry players forward, there's plenty of fun to be had by simply dropping into the freestyle mode and seeing what crazy beats and mash-ups you can create. When you're ready to actually shoot for a high score, there's plenty to juggle; I found myself happily overwhelmed by the driving rhythmic flow of play

From there, it's all about changing up the mix with new parts (often in response to fan demands), hitting the downbeats to create smooth transitions, and even writing in your own riffs on instruments like synths and drums, which then get added into the song as it plays live. And unlike many of Harmonix's previous projects, Fuser requires no additional peripherals. The game's music-mixing tech has to be played and heard to be believed; genuine opportunities for creative music making await. » **Matt Miller**

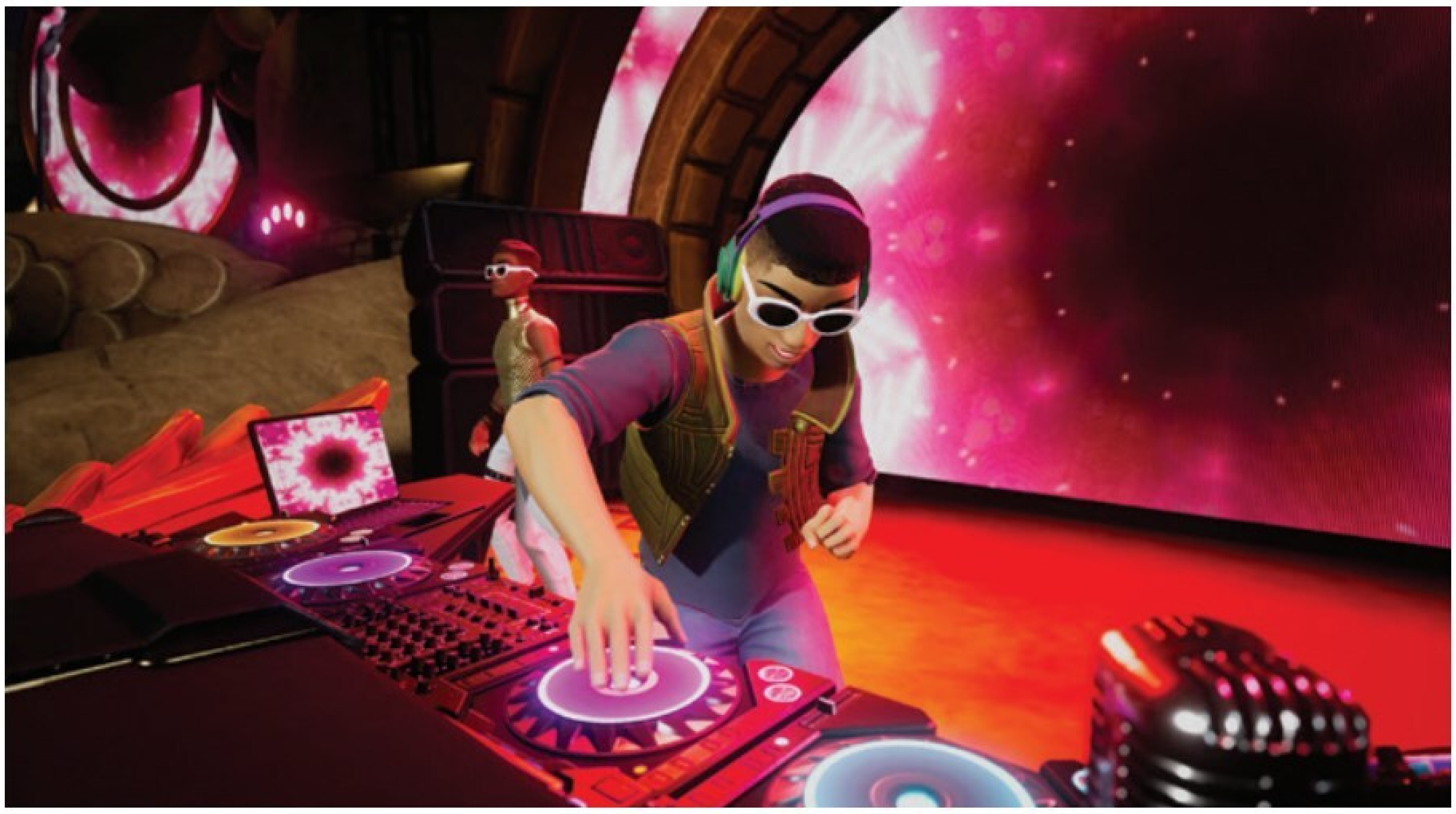
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

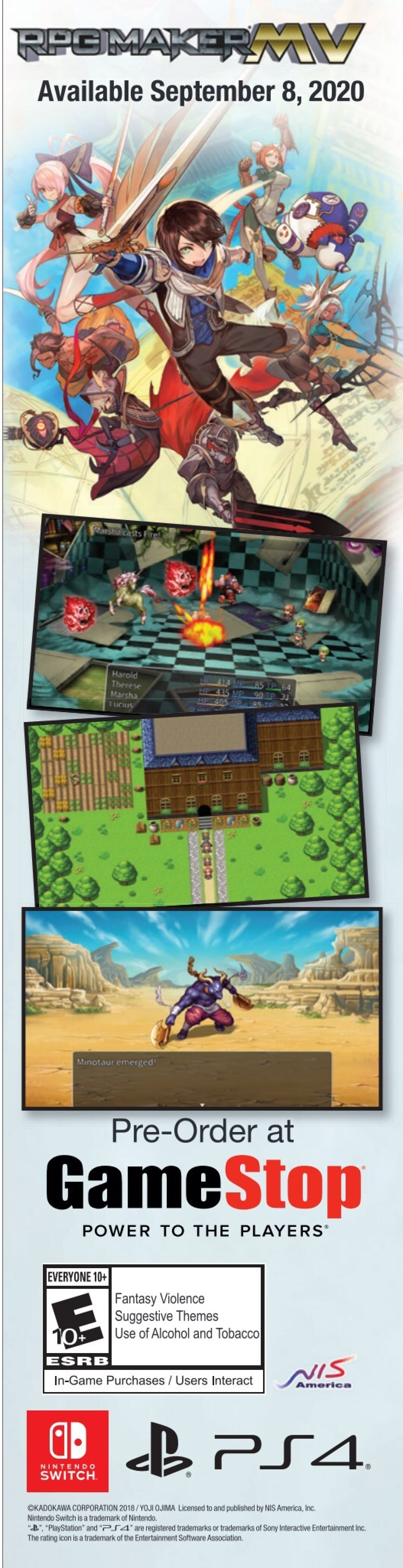
» **Style**
1-Player
Rhythm/Music

» **Publisher**
NCSOFT

» **Developer**
Harmonix
Music Systems

» **Release**
Fall





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NINTENDO SWITCH

PS4

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UFC 4

Evolution over innovation

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Vancouver

» **Release**
August 14

If you ask any UFC champion how they compare to their former self, they're likely to bring up the term "evolution." Fighters are constantly in pursuit of knowledge and improvement as they seek to not only become the best in the world, but continue to build their legacy as among the greatest to ever do it. As the only UFC-licensed video game in town, UFC 4 doesn't need to worry about outpacing the competition, but rather demonstrating that it still deserves to be the de facto champion.

It all begins with overhauled gameplay. Developer EA Vancouver remade several elements, including the ground and clinch games, as well as takedowns, to feel less robotic and more reliant on things like locomotion. In addition, once it does hit the ground, you have new postured combos for the fighter on top, new defensive measures like head movement for the fighter on the bottom, and two new submission minigames depending on the kind of technique you use.

Since every round begins on the feet, UFC 4 also shores up UFC 3's already strong striking. New dynamic controls introduce a tap/hold system that lets you dictate if you throw a quick strike or a more powerful blow based on how long you hold the button. The new system was designed with the explicit purpose of being more intuitive and less confusing for players to throw the exact strike they want in the heat of battle.

While showing your skills in one-off fights is fun, the career mode is the destination where most players end up, so EA Vancouver improved various aspects of that experience. Much like in UFC 3's career mode, your objective is to become the greatest of all time by completing a combination of performance and promotional goals before you retire. While the ultimate goal is the same, the way in which you progress your fighter is completely different.

Through a new Fighter Evolution system, your attributes level up based on how much you use those moves in fights and sparring. "Our big focus this year is really making sure that the players had lots of choices and that those choices matter," creative director Brian Hayes says. "That comes down to the choice of literally every move you make inside training or inside the Octagon."

That sense of choice extends to your training and promotion for your fight. You can invite fighters to come train with you and teach you moves, but be careful with your social-media trash talk; if you develop a negative relationship with another fighter, they're less likely to join you in your camp. You can also choose to invest your finite preparation time to scout your upcoming opponent.

Another centerpiece feature is the upgraded Create-a-Fighter suite, which adds new hairstyles, facial options, and more. You now choose from 12 pre-existing fighter templates for their attributes and can equip your created fighter with cosmetic items like masks, jewelry, and clothing that would never be allowed inside the actual Octagon, as well as pre-fight, post-fight, and in-fight emotes.

With so many improvements touted in this fourth UFC-licensed outing for EA Sports, it's hard not to be excited for what could await fans when they step into the Octagon. Thankfully, we don't have long to wait before we see how all these improvements coalesce into a singular combat experience as UFC 4 launches this month.

» **Brian Shea**

SHEVCHENKO
ESPN

CrossfireX

Bringing Remedy's style to military FPS

Games developed by Remedy Entertainment are often defined by unique narrative twists and strange phenomena. Because of that, the military first-person shooter genre may seem like a strange fit for the studio, but the team is determined to bring its own brand of in-your-face shooter action to Smilegate's wildly successful FPS through miniature campaigns called Operations.

Despite seeming like a unique choice for the genre, Remedy executive producer Tuukka Taipalvesi says Remedy was the exact kind of studio developer Smilegate was looking for due to the team's world-building capabilities. "For over a decade, they have been building this world of CrossFire through multiplayer modes, multiplayer maps, and information that they shared with the players before they jump into multiplayer," he says. "We needed to do some data archaeology and start to make sense of the actual world timeline and build that from the ground up."

The resulting story explores the history and conflict between the two warring factions, Black List and Global Risk. Remedy's mission was to not only build up the world and adequately lay out the timeline of events, but to also add depth and recognizable characters to the story.

I see an example of how the studio is building up these characters through a gameplay segment featuring Luis Torres. In this mission, I'm introduced to Black List Specialist Nicholas Kamara, who joins Torres in attempting to escape an abandoned hospital. Torres can use an ability called Combat Breaker – essentially CrossfireX's take on the slow-motion Bullet Time from the from the Max Payne series – to target enemies and explosives with precision.

As the two make their way to the rooftop to catch a helicopter ride out of the building that has been swarmed by Global Risk operatives, an enemy jet fires a rocket into the room the two are in, knocking Torres unconscious. When he comes to, Kamara is gone and Torres has fallen into the sewers. When he emerges from the subterranean labyrinth, he's greeted by two Black List operatives, Logan and Cora. Together, they hop into a vacant ambulance to make their escape, but it won't be easy with Global Risk hot on their tails.

This results in an on-rails shooting sequence, requiring Torres to blast soldiers on rooftops and in the streets, as well as military vehicles and drones. The scene culminates with a heavily armored truck ramming into the crew; Torres' bullets are no match for this combat-ready vehicle. Thinking fast, Cora throws an oxygen tank into the grill of the truck and Torres ignites it with a shot from his rifle. The chase may be over, but the action is just beginning as the ambulance veers off the road and into the sea below.

While things get chaotic in this sequence, it is just the tip of the iceberg. "There is some crazier stuff, definitely, in the Operation, but like every Remedy game, it's rooted in reality – whether it's Max Payne, Alan Wake – and then we have that layer of fantastic that comes on top, so there is definitely that in CrossfireX," says head of communications, Thomas Puha.

Remedy may be developing these Operations as a single-player component of the title, but Smilegate's multiplayer is still a major focus of the game. According to Remedy, the studio is creating two Operations, with each one taking three to four hours to complete, depending on difficulty and thoroughness.

As one of the most-played games of all time, CrossFire has already proven its viability in Asian markets. With an all-new story by a beloved studio in tow, as well as an updated version of the multiplayer that made the series a nearly unrivaled phenomenon in many parts of the world, Smilegate is hoping this is how it finally makes a big splash in the rest of the planet. » **Brian Shea**

» Platform
Xbox Series X
Xbox One

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(16-Player Online)

» Publisher
Xbox Game Studios

» Developer
Smilegate,
Remedy Entertainment

» Release
2020

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 328

74 Ghost Of Tsushima

Imagine tense duels, peaceful steam baths, and cherry blossoms blowing in the wind. Ghost of Tsushima has all that and more, taking inspiration from samurai cinema to create a stylized and striking vision of feudal Japan. The open-world adventure combines bloody swordfights and quiet moments of reflection, all while letting players explore an island full of secrets. With this somber-yet-rewarding tale, developer Sucker Punch sends off the PS4 in style, delivering what may be the system's last great exclusive.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10 Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.

9 Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.

8 Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.

7 Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.

6 Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.

5 Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.

4 Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.

3 Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.

2 Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.

1 Archers.

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

Ghost Of Tsushima

A most honorable epic

9.5

PS4

» Concept
Face the competing demands of honor and vengeance in a free-roaming samurai legend

» Graphics
Sensuous and stunning environments suggest a painter's vision of feudal Japan, juxtaposed against the brutal imagery of warfare

» Sound
An award-worthy score thrums with emotional resonance and subtlety, summoning cultural instrumentation and vocals to bring the world to life. The English voice cast handles the narrative with delicacy and restraint, and Japanese audio options are supported if you wish for additional authenticity

» Playability
The many interlocking systems and controls are gradually introduced with care, and the learning curve is spot-on

» Entertainment
At turns both melancholy and thrilling, Ghost of Tsushima is the open-world action formula at its most mature and immersive. Deep, rewarding, and hard to put down

» Replay Value
Moderate

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 328

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Sucker Punch Productions **Release** July 17 **Rating** M

Most great games stand on the shoulders of their predecessors. Ghost of Tsushima unabashedly borrows many of its strongest features from other open-world adventures, and executes on them with skill. The game owes a tremendous debt to the Assassin's Creed games; in many ways, Ghost of Tsushima feels like an entry in that franchise set in Japan – something that fans have longed for. But it's unfair to paint Sucker Punch's immense samurai epic as a copycat. By tapping into Japanese art, history, and culture, as well as the samurai film tradition that followed, Ghost of Tsushima finds a wholly original tone within the gaming landscape. Across an especially vast adventure, players are treated to a tale about the contradictory ideals of honor and revenge, and one in which tense katana duels and quiet moments of reflection claim equal focus.

Structurally, Ghost of Tsushima is an adventure told in three acts, each almost wholly dedicated to one geographical section of a massive island. Astride your loyal horse (whose name you select early on), you gallop between Mongol-occupied forts, idyllic Buddhist temples, and remote mountaintop shrines, gradually ticking off completed locations as your honor-sworn warrior grows in power and acquires new weapons and tools. From convenient fast-travel options to smart delineations of mission types, you always know what you're working toward and how to move forward. Side missions and distractions are plentiful, and full engagement with the bulk of the content is a project of 50+ hours.

As the survivor of a doomed samurai charge to hold off a Mongol invasion, Jin Sakai is a conflicted and tortured hero. Trained to be the best of his samurai caste, the tension between his familial duty and the need for justice forms the heart of the story. A small but richly drawn cast of allies surrounds him – each flawed in their own way – who are coming to terms with their warring natures. The interwoven stories that unfold carry very little lightheartedness or humor, instead opting for a somber contemplation on the horrors of war. They portray a mother's grief for her murdered grandchildren, the weight of survivor's guilt, and the loss of innocence when we perceive our heroes' failings. As a player, moments of true victory are rare – try to save a man's family, only to find his wife and child are already dead. The game is a meditation on suffering, and I was surprised by Sucker Punch's uncompromising adherence to that vision.

Rather than counter that form with levity, Ghost of Tsushima finds relief in nature's beauty. The island of Tsushima is an exaggerated and painterly vision of feudal Japan, where gently curving cherry trees blow endless blossoms across windswept fields of pampas grass. Set a new objective marker, and the breeze shifts direction to guide you to your destinations. Birds and foxes emerge to guide you to hidden hot springs and shrines. Especially impressive weather effects set the mood, from ghostly fog-shrouded forests to thunderstorms that presage moments of conflict. Scattered mats invite you to sit and craft poetry with a dedicated haiku mechanic. The artistic presentation, alongside one of the best scores in recent memory, make for a world well worth fighting to save, which makes its desecration feel especially perverse.

The invading Mongol army and its stoic commander, Khotun Khan, emerge as fearsome antagonists, ably subverting Japanese defenses by taking advantage of the samurai's guiding code. The Khan's tactics and brutality are especially heinous, and you'll be almost as eager as the protagonist to bring him down. His minions may not have the same narrative depth, but their varied weapons, attack patterns, and appearances keep the moment-to-moment encounters exciting and challenging, even late into the game.

In encountering the enemy, players balance two competing playstyles. The first is a particularly smooth and gratifying melee combat system, focused on wielding the katana in a variety of stances. Battles are deadly and precise, and the focus on defensive parrying is a fun challenge. With a dedicated stance for each primary enemy type, combat demands observation of your enemy and quick reaction time. Sophisticated animation work lends a cinematic quality to the fast-paced battles.

The second approach to combat takes Jin down the questionable path of infiltration and assassination. Over time, several tools enhance the options here, letting players mess with the enemy or terrorize them into flight. Both approaches are deeply satisfying; you don't face consequences for being sneaky instead of straightforward, so it's not about picking one or the other. You choose your tactics based on what is most appealing to you in a given encounter.

Both styles of play are supported by a robust set of upgrades, many of which provide meaningful new options. I love how the progression front-loads the things you really want for your character into the first half of the game, like parrying blows and deflecting arrows. However, this also means you spend points on things you don't especially care about later on. On the bright side, the game reserves a couple of its coolest new powers, ability-infused armor sets, and cosmetic options for the late-game, so I remained engaged with progression even after my core tree of upgrades had been mostly filled.

The "tales" that take you between one encounter to the next are mostly enjoyable, and certainly plentiful. Every one of the main narrative missions feels distinct, often presenting rousing large-scale battles and honorable one-on-one duels. The dedicated and multi-part tales for each of your allies are equally worthwhile, telling personal and pathos-laden stories of loss. A third variety of minor tales about the citizens of Tsushima pale in comparison; they grow repetitive, but they're mostly there for players who simply desire more time in this gorgeous world. My only notable frustration was with occasionally unclear objectives or targets focused on tracking or investigation, leading to moments of fruitless circling of an area until I happened upon the next marker.

Beyond these structured missions, thorough map exploration leads to many enjoyable discoveries, from health-boosting hot springs to hard-to-reach shrines that provide new charms to enhance your abilities. I appreciated the many hidden caves and hideaways the map had in store, and I liked the opportunity to do some relatively simple platforming. However, traversal and climbing challenges often trace very static paths, with little freedom to chart one's own course, and I sometimes found those sequences a bit simplistic.

Ghost of Tsushima captures the mystique, fierce violence, and barely contained emotional angst of the great samurai films. The line of inspiration is clearly purposeful; Sucker Punch included a gorgeous "Kurosawa Mode," which sets a black-and-white, film-grain, audio-treated effect that doubles down on the classic cinematic vibe. It's well worth turning on, if only for a few missions. But even beyond that cool feature, this is a game that nails the aesthetic it's shooting for, firmly establishing itself as the medium's defining samurai saga. » **Matt Miller**

Paper Mario: The Origami King

Just above the fold

7.75

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Intelligent Systems **Release** July 17 **Rating** E

Switch

» Concept
King Olly has invaded the Mushroom Kingdom and folded its denizens into origami monstrosities. Now it's up to Mario to save the day

» Graphics
Nintendo's papercraft aesthetic is full of charm. Some of the digital effects – especially water – are so realistic they're a little jarring

» Sound
The music is upbeat, but the wealth of dialogue has me wishing Nintendo would finally add voicework to the series because scrolling through text gets tiring

» Playability
Origami King's ring-based battles add a puzzle-like element to Paper Mario's traditional turn-based combat

» Entertainment
As usual, Nintendo's quirky writing is full of laugh-out-loud moments, but your quest is full of tiresome backtracking

» Replay Value
Moderate

When Paper Mario debuted on the N64, it took the turn-based RPG battles from Square's Super Mario RPG and wrapped them around a clever papercraft aesthetic to create a wildly humorous adventure. Over the years, the Paper Mario series has moved away from traditional stat-based RPG leveling and tried various new mechanics with mixed success, but its lighthearted antics rarely disappoint. In Paper Mario: The Origami King, Nintendo's humor remains on point, but much like an actual origami figure, the rest of the experience is a bit hollow.

After receiving an invitation from Princess Peach to attend an origami festival, Mario sets off toward Toad Town, only to discover that an invader named King Olly has assumed power and folded the inhabitants of the Mushroom Kingdom into origami minions. Fortunately, this is the kind of trouble that is easily undone with a good head stomp, so Mario gets to work. Mario's journey to defeat King Olly is full of wild shenanigans. You search for a can opener so you can feed tuna to a monkey, explore a derelict cruise ship full of terrorized Toads, and send Mario through fax machines to teleport across the world. Nintendo's pun-filled writing is full of giggles, and I loved meeting Origami King's wild cast of characters. I even got strangely emotional after helping my bob-omb companion find his missing fuse.

While I enjoyed Origami King's dialogue, the story's pacing is uneven. I often needed to backtrack through a level to find a missing person or locate a key to a lock preventing me from progressing. These speed bumps are frequent, and while the writing remains clever throughout, they kill the momentum. I grew tired of running back and forth across environments I'd already thoroughly explored.

Like previous Paper Mario games, Origami King's action takes place in a series of turn-based encounters. However, the structure is different this time, with Mario's enemies positioned atop several concentric rings. During the first phase of each battle, Mario can rotate or slide around the blocks that make up these rings to line up his enemies. Like a Rubik's Cube, you manipulate your foes to group them together, which makes them easier to clear out. I appreciate the challenge of lining up these baddies before wiping an entire row off the board with one strong attack, but the combat system doesn't evolve beyond its initial promise. Since you don't gain experience, you have few incentives to participate in repeat battles, and it starts to feel pointless. By the time I was halfway through the game, I was trying to avoid combat whenever possible because it had grown so boring.

Origami King's ring-based battles are flipped around for boss encounters, as Mario starts on the outer ring and works his way toward the center. These drawn-out fights require more puzzle-solving, with you sliding the rings around to avoid obstacles and then positioning Mario for an optimal attack. Again, I enjoyed the basic sliding mechanics, and the boss battles add an extra layer of complexity that I missed during basic encounters, but these confrontations overstay their welcome. Most bosses require a great deal of trial-and-error before you discern where you need to position Mario and what kind of attack he needs to employ to deal damage. Defeating these monstrous foes is ultimately rewarding, but I was also often equally frazzled by the end of the ordeal.

As a series, Paper Mario constantly explores new concepts and mechanics, which is exciting, but that comes with plenty of risks. Origami King's biggest chances don't pay off in a satisfying way. I enjoyed Mario's hijinks and all the misfits he encounters, but the new ring-based action needs refinement. I hope Paper Mario's next twist on combat can rise to the same level as its humor.

» Ben Reeves

Rocket Arena

Ballistic banality

Style 6-Player Online Action **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Final Strike Games **Release** July 14 **Rating** T

Rocket Arena is yet another offering in the world of third-person hero shooters, a 3v3 experience with several modes that all involve the same core concept: You blast the other team with salvos of rockets! Rockets have been popular weapons in shooters for decades, and here you can wall-climb, rocket-jump, and jet-propel yourself all over the arena. With humdrum heroes, cool maps, and gameplay that gets old fast, Rocket Arena is a mixed experience in a world inundated with offerings all vying for players' attention.

Heroes are an essential part of any hero shooter, but none of their designs resonated with me. There's mermaid girl, guy with dinosaur hatchling, pirate man, and other rejects from a theoretical Nickelodeon cartoon lineup. Their loadouts are more interesting; they each have cool variants on rockets, whether you like rapid-fire mini-rockets, bouncing rockets, or sniper-scoped rockets. In addition to your primary rocket style, you have some special skills and an active dodge, the latter being a timing skill test that you can master after you've handled the rest of your kit.

All matches are 3v3, and they include modes where you score goals like a sporting event, try to hold a specific area as it moves around the map, attempt to collect the most coins, or just plain knock your opponents out of the arena. The treasure-hunting game and the soccer-inspired mode feel slightly different from the rest of the offerings, but not in good ways. Rocketball can leave you completely unaware of what's happening before a goal is scored, and treasure hunt feels like a party game one-off event that's jarring compared to the rest of the artillery play, running around to scoop up coins like a speed platformer.

The arenas themselves are quite small, appearing like mini theme parks complete with unique mechanics to play around, like a train running through a mountain canyon. They're well-designed, foster lots of action, and have more personality than the heroes themselves.

I settled on Topnotch as my favorite hero, a salt-of-the-earth old rocketeer who features bouncing rockets, a line artillery strike, and a huge lock-on blast that's great for area denial and blowing up multiple enemies in a single strike. While I enjoyed Topnotch more than other characters, playing Rocket Arena becomes rote quickly. The moment-to-moment zipping around each arena, blasting away with rockets ad nauseam and splashing in your abilities on cooldown loses its luster and becomes monotonous.

Mystery boxes attempt to add a bit of flash and flavor to each round but fail. Each match has an assortment of bombs, speed ups, and other powerups that you can pick up from random boxes. The powerups feel like they should be significant, but most of the time you just throw/trigger them and go about your business as usual. The ephemeral fun factor doesn't stick around from match to match. It's cool for a few rounds, but there's a serious lack of desire to come back for more.

Rocket Arena is a competent game with a clear sense of what a 3v3 rocket match should be from a technical perspective, but it furtively struggles to find an entertaining hook to keep players coming back. In today's world of countless shooters, it's destined to be forgotten. » **Daniel Tack**

7

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Play a variety of rocket-oriented modes involving competitive 3v3 action

» Graphics
While the character designs do little to astound and amaze, the maps are cool little theme parks

» Sound
The sound of rockets is in the air and other important auditory cues are handled appropriately

» Playability
With just a handful of abilities on each character, the gameplay is remarkably approachable, even for those who have never played an arena shooter

» Entertainment
Rocket Arena is a clean, polished arena shooter. However, the novelty evaporates quickly despite its ostentatious candy coating

» Replay Value
Moderate

Marvel's Iron Man VR

Not quite invincible

7.5

PSVR

» Concept
Don Tony Stark's iconic Iron Man suit in VR as you soar through several missions to stop a revenge-driven adversary

» Graphics
Flying through the clouds and over water looks good, but the Shanghai map is a mess of fuzzy textures and poor sense of scale

» Sound
The signature repulsor effects sound terrific, and most of the voice acting is good

» Playability
Flying around and blasting enemies out of the sky is simple enough, but once the maps open up and the objectives become more complicated, the learning curve gets steep

» Entertainment
While trying to precisely navigate is frustrating, using Iron Man's full arsenal in combat is satisfying

» Replay Value
Moderate

Style 1-Player Shooter **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Camoflaj **Release** July 3 **Rating** T

As one of the most beloved superheroes, Iron Man is nearly as recognizable as any other character in pop culture today. Despite his success in films and comic books, video game prosperity has thus far eluded Marvel's icon. With Iron Man VR, developer Camoflaj lets you step into Tony Stark's power armor as you fly, blast, and quip your way through several missions spanning the globe. Iron Man VR gives you all the thrills of saving the day, but even early in the adventure, it's easy to notice the cracks in the armor.

You assume the role the popular Avenger who has served as one of Marvel's most iconic characters for years. Once you don the Iron Man suit, you use PlayStation Move controllers and the PSVR headset itself to dictate how and where you fly. Tilt the controllers behind you and you hurtle forward, and change direction by adjusting the angle of your arms and where you're looking. Flying forward feels intuitive and terrific; whenever I was speeding along a linear path, I truly felt like a capable hero.

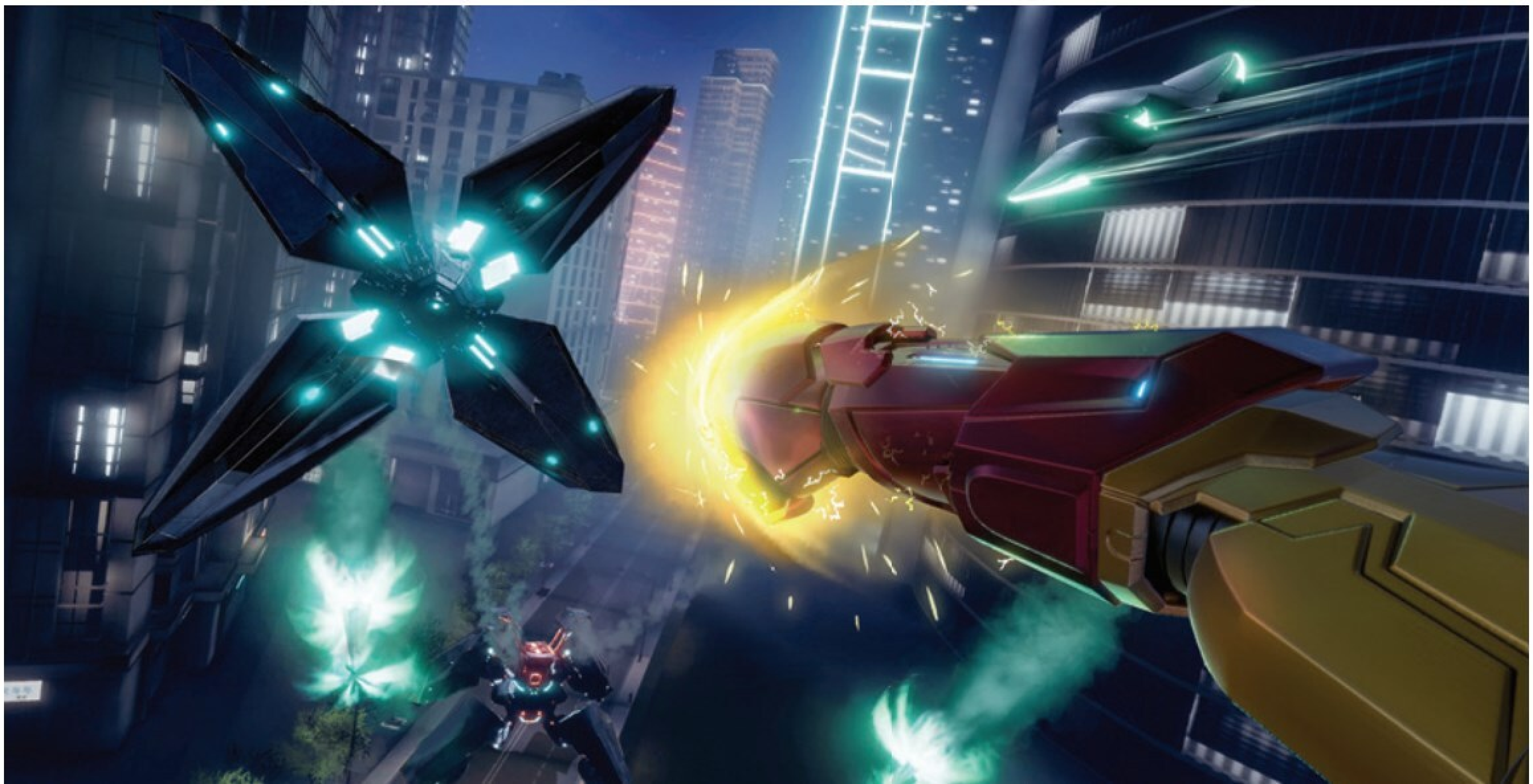
Combat in Iron Man VR is superb. Using the motion controllers to access Iron Man's full arsenal of weapons made me feel like I was one of Earth's mightiest heroes. Whether I was blasting waves of drones with Stark's signature repulsors or unleashing a furious wave of lock-on missiles at a stunned adversary, Iron Man VR effectively makes you feel like the man in the suit. My favorite combination to pull off was to ground pound a hovertank from the sky, then while it was airborne from the shockwave, melt away its armor with a chaingun and finish it off with a cluster bomb. Chaining together combos to take down ferocious foes never ceases to satisfy, and I always looked forward to testing my aim and improvisation in the more intense firefights. If things get too hairy, defeating enemies charges your unibeam, an awesome ultimate attack that can level the playing field and shift the odds in your favor regardless of the situation.

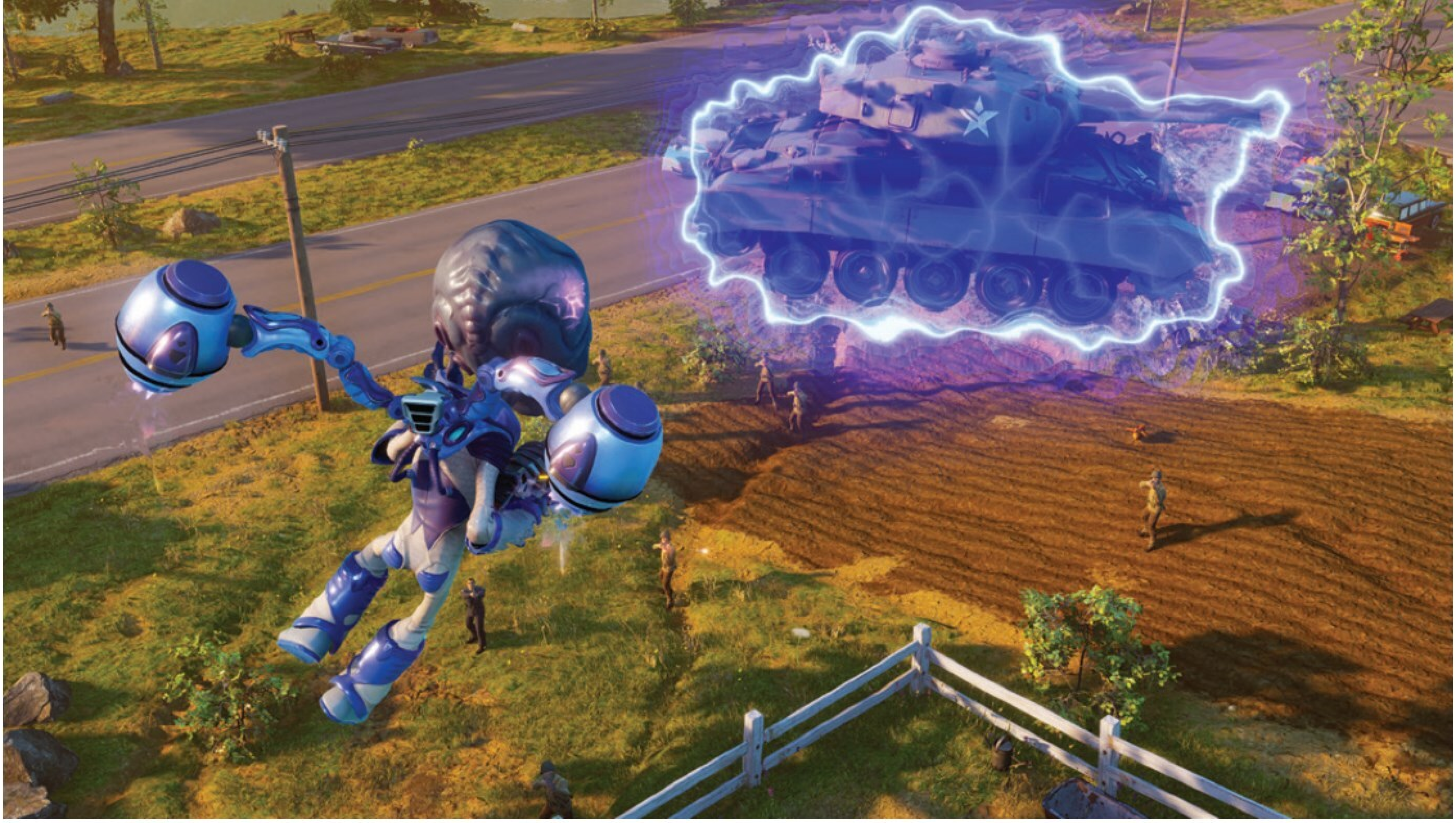
Most missions take place in open areas, requiring you to complete objectives while fending off waves of enemies. As you turn at all angles and adjust your height, the frantic pace can be disorienting. The controls are imprecise if you physically turn around (and away from the sensors), but the only alternative is using the buttons to manually turn and readjust the camera, which completely ruins the thrilling sense of presence. Even near the end of the campaign, as I began to feel like an expert in the flight controls, I often went soaring into walls and struggled to keep up with the more nimble bosses in environments full of beams and pillars. These encounters rarely resulted in my defeat, but they went on far longer than they held my interest.

Tony Stark is more than just Iron Man. Between missions, you take control of the complicated man behind the iron mask. In these sections, you move around by selecting waypoints in the environment and teleporting. While Stark's mansion has fun Easter eggs and inconsequential minigames, the most valuable use of your time at home is customizing your armor. In addition to getting new paintjobs, you can use earned skill points to unlock upgrades. These improvements range from speed boosters and faster health regeneration to various new weapons. While I barely noticed the speed advantages granted by those upgrades, my two loadouts played very different from each other by the end of the game thanks to the diverse selection of auxiliary bombs and guns available to equip.

During these heavily restricted in-between moments, you get a glimpse into the life of Tony Stark, the internal struggles of reconciling his past as an international arms dealer with his desire to be a heroic beacon for the world, and how his decisions affect not only those he cares about, but those he doesn't even know exist. That premise serves as the backdrop to the story, as the supervillain Ghost seeks to avenge those killed by Stark Industries weapons using her hacking skills and high-tech suit. This assault on both fronts of Tony's life leads to compelling situations and fun moments, even if Ghost's sidekick, Living Laser, feels ripped from a Saturday-morning cartoon.

As a huge fan of the iron Avenger, Iron Man VR has me torn. I love the feeling of putting on the iconic suit and destroying waves of enemies, but for every moment I felt like a seasoned superhero soaring into action and taking down the bad guys, the finicky flight controls made me feel more like someone who snuck into Stark's workshop to take the suit for a spin with no prior training. Iron Man VR delivers a fun adventure for fans of Marvel's iconic hero, but it too often feels hindered by the virtual-reality technology rather than elevated by it. » **Brian Shea**





Destroy All Humans

An obsolete invasion

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** THQ Nordic **Developer** Black Forest Games **Release** July 28 **Rating** T

All great works are products of their particular era. However, some pieces of art reach beyond those bounds; it's why literature students still read Shakespeare, and why *Citizen Kane* is still considered one of the best films ever made. Removed from their historical context, they transcend time and tap into something universal. Destroy All Humans lacks this special quality – a fact that was constantly apparent as I winced my way through this remake.

To be clear, I have fond memories of my time with the original. Destroy All Humans first came out in 2005, developed by the now-closed Pandemic Studios. Back then, I thought its sardonic vision of an alien invasion in the 1950s was amusing and clever, and the ridiculous weapons (like an anal-probe gun) were fun to use. I loved zapping humans, exploring the open environments, and flying around in my saucer. I'm not apologizing for enjoying these things 15 years ago, but the experience holds up poorly in every way. Destroy All Humans feels like it belongs in a time capsule that should have stayed buried.

Not everything is exactly as I remember; improved visuals are a big part of the overhaul for developer Black Forest Games' new version. The characters and mayhem definitely look better, but if you're familiar with the original, you'll also notice other improvements. For instance, the controls and interface have been tweaked to feel more modern and intuitive. However, the basic design, story, and dialogue are faithful to the 2005 version – and that's the problem. Minor quality-of-life changes are nice, but fixing them seems pointless when more important aspects remain so painfully untouched. It's like treating the symptoms of an illness rather than the underlying cause.

Mission design is the most pervasive issue, and it's where the action feels the most outdated. Your goals may have irreverent wrappings, like using psychokinesis to throw radioactive cows, but the gameplay mechanics in each level are disappointingly common. They feature a parade of tired mid-2000s conventions, like "survive the waves of enemies" and "protect the tower" objectives with uneven difficulty spikes and bad checkpoints. Even at their best, these activities are repetitive and predictable.

You also have to infiltrate areas using a holographic disguise, which can only be refreshed by constantly reading thoughts of the humans around you, forcing you to experience the same bits of dialogue over and over. Some of these lines might earn a smile the first time you hear them, but there's always a second, third, and fourth to run the joke into the ground.

The humor is another defining feature that has not aged well. What might have seemed subversive and hilarious in 2005 just feels lame and juvenile now, from Crypto's love of probing to his Jack Nicholson-like voice. This writing was never exactly subtle, but the caricatures of government agents, housewives, and rural farmers only appear more obvious and blunt today. And though the game begins by warning players it was first created in another time, jokes about things like police brutality make it hard to get on the same wavelength and laugh along with Destroy All Humans.

Black Forest Games created a better-looking version of a 15-year-old game, and this remake is a success in that regard. But whether or not Destroy All Humans is worth revisiting is a different question altogether. The brightest moments are when the action gives way to pure chaos. I watched electricity arc between humans, made brains pop out of heads, and turned a secret base into smoldering ruins with my spaceship's death ray. But like a person floating above the ground in the glow of an abducto beam, those moments aren't connected to anything substantial; they just make some noise and get flung aside. » **Joe Juba**

6

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Recreate a fondly remembered game from 2005, improving the visuals but leaving nearly everything else intact

» Graphics
Compared to the original, the visual effects and character models are a big step up. Compared to modern games, it still looks pretty rough

» Sound
The music nails the cinematic sci-fi vibe, but the voice acting is obnoxious

» Playability
An updated interface makes it easier to locate important information, and the controls suit the action fine

» Entertainment
This remake successfully preserves the Destroy All Humans experience, regardless of whether it's fun or funny today

» Replay Value
Moderately low

Bloodstained: Curse Of The Moon 2

Second curse, same as the first

7

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Inti Creates **Developer** Inti Creates **Release** July 10 **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept
Swap between four heroes as you journey through several monster-filled levels inspired by Castlevania's 8-bit era

» Graphics
The art style is faithfully reminiscent of the classics it imitates, but it lacks the razzle-dazzle of modern retro-inspired pixel games

» Sound
A repetitive chiptune soundtrack still has a few good beats

» Playability
Inti Creates' simple, side-scrolling action should play well with anyone who has a soft spot for their NES

» Entertainment
Swapping between your heroes to tackle different tasks is fun, but the slow action and rigid platforming belong in the past

» Replay Value
Moderate

Last year's Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night was a loving tribute to the PlayStation classic Castlevania: Symphony of the Night and its beloved successors, which were developed by Koji Igarashi. However, a year before the release of Ritual of the Night, Inti Creates released another game under the Bloodstained banner that went deeper into Castlevania's past for inspiration. Now, Inti Creates is back with Curse of the Moon 2, an incredibly straightforward sequel that feels largely similar to the first, and sadly suffers from many of the same flaws.

As with the 2018 entry, Bloodstained: Curse of the Moon 2 lets you control four distinct monster slayers. You switch between these heroes as you battle a throng of gothic beasts. Naturally, every hero has their own strengths and weaknesses. Zangetsuto feels like the traditional Castlevania hero; he has a short attack range but makes up for it with quick movements and a sizeable health pool. On the other hand, Robert is physically weak, but he's also a skilled sniper who eradicates enemies from across the screen. Each hero brings something new to the battlefield, and matching their talents to the challenges ahead puts a unique spin on the traditional side-scrolling action. For example, Dominique was rarely my go-to in combat thanks to her slow-moving spear-attacks, but her extra-high jumps made her instrumental during challenging platforming sequences.

Curse of the Moon 2's levels feature several branching paths and a good variety of locations. Some routes offer a lighter challenge, while others provide a more direct path to the boss. I like the variety this offers when replaying a level, but aside from a handful of health and attack upgrades, there aren't many reasons to explore every path through a level. In classic 8-bit style, some areas have you dodging poisonous clouds of smoke, while others have you skating over frozen ground. And it wouldn't be a side-scroller if you didn't jump from rock to rock on a river of lava. These sequences perfectly fit the tone of the game, but I couldn't escape the sense that I'd been here and done this all before. Curse of the Moon 2 doesn't put an interesting twist on these classic tropes – it just recycles them.

After you reach credits for the first time, you unlock Episode 2, which asks you to replay each level to unlock the true ending. This repetition is annoying, but I appreciate the opportunity to unlock new characters, and I was happy to see that the bosses get remixed, making them harder to bring down. At the same time, even during my first playthrough, Curse of the Moon 2 provided a sizeable challenge, largely thanks to a knockback effect whenever you get hit. You can turn this effect off, but only by playing on the easier difficulty. Naturally, this knockback is an homage to old Castlevania games, but it results in more than a few cheap deaths.

Bloodstained: Curse of the Moon 2 may as well have come out in 1989. It looks and feels like a game from three decades ago. If that was the only goal, it succeeds with flying colors. Unfortunately, that's not a very ambitious goal, since the market full of side-scrolling 8-bit inspired gems that cleverly blend genres and make use of modern gaming conventions. Curse of the Moon offers a few hours of mindless action, but there are better nostalgia trips out there. » **Ben Reeves**

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Deadly Premonition 2: A Blessing In Disguise

Chasing its own shadow

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Rising Star Games **Developer** Toybox Inc. **Release** July 10 **Rating** M

Some people think the appeal of 2010's Deadly Premonition boiled down to "so bad it's good," but I don't think that's accurate. Back then, a lot of us unironically loved the game. It had an earnest charm, conveyed through a unique small-town setting and memorable characters like FBI special agent Francis York Morgan. Yes, it had technical issues, but fans saw past them and developed a genuine appreciation for the gameplay and story. Unfortunately, that degree of goodwill is practically impossible to extend to this sequel; much like the victim at the center of its story, Deadly Premonition 2: A Blessing in Disguise feels like a lifeless relic frozen in ice.

The tale is split between two main sections. The first takes place in present day Boston, where a pair of FBI agents are investigating the recent reappearance of a murder victim's missing body. As it turns out, this young lady was the central figure of one of York's earlier cases, which took place in Le Carré, Louisiana. These present-day portions play like a visual novel, with a bare minimum of interaction and loads of dialogue. It's not a great way to kick off the adventure, and the pacing and line delivery is agonizingly slow.

These present-day sections feel plodding, but they don't take up much playtime. The majority of the game flashes back to York's time in Le Carré, where he investigates the gruesome murder of a young girl. Once York realizes its connection to a drug ring and the mysterious appearance of red seeds, he's determined to take over the investigation. The case itself is strange and convoluted, and the investigation goes in directions that even the most ardent fans won't expect.

Le Carré is home to a robust cast of weirdos, which is probably why York seems to enjoy being there so much. The Casa Pineapple hotel, where York stays, is staffed by a chef, bellhop, and concierge that appear to be the same person. Melvin, the town Sheriff, enjoys recapping what's going on in the style of a movie-trailer announcer. Patricia, Melvin's daughter, tags along with York for much of the investigation, providing some sass and local insight. I always looked forward to meeting one of the town oddballs, since it's one of those all-too-rare situations where you genuinely don't know what's coming next. In director Hidetaka "Swery" Suehiro's world, anything truly is possible, no matter how dumb, silly, or outlandish.

Deadly Premonition 2 is a frustrating experience because it nails so many of the things that made the first game great. For instance, there's a character named Emma who runs a skateboard shop in her garage. She also plays upright bass at the Owl's Nest bar with her dad and the owner. Emma's dad is the town's pastor, and he also runs the medical clinic. All this is to say that Emma wears a layered shirt with stars on the sleeves and the word "baptize" printed on the front. It's weird while being technically accurate, which is a tightrope walk Swery and his team nailed in the first game. I don't even mind graphical oddities and glitches such as Emma occasionally being rendered in her garage in the same space as her instrument – arms jutting out of its sides like she's wearing a bass-guitar costume. As a fan of the first game, I wasn't expecting technical perfection, but my forgiving approach to these shortcomings ends when they affect gameplay. And boy, do they.

Emma's shop isn't just for show. York had his car stolen when he arrived in town, and he's been getting around on a skateboard. He's a better skateboarder than he was a driver – or at least the controls are better. The framerate, however, just about kills it and everything else in Le Carré's open world. It's a halting, stuttering slideshow that gets worse when using one of the most efficient means of travel. The framerate problem isn't limited to your time on the skateboard, either; regular on-foot exploration also pushed my tolerance to its limits. The issue also makes other tasks a complete guessing game; while bowling, the meters that govern your shot's strength and spin are rendered nearly useless thanks to choppy performance.

I loved the play-at-your-own-pace philosophy the first game embraced, which is an important aspect that the sequel is missing. The minigames and sidequests just pad out the length; they don't add insight to any of the characters. Prizes for these side activities include components that you can use to craft special tokens, which increase your various gun-handling stats, give you more stamina, or tweak any other number of behind-the-scenes meters. The game is so trivially easy and meeting York's various food and maintenance requirements is so simple that there's no reason to engage with any of these systems apart from your own sense of completion.

When the credits rolled, I was completely shocked. Not because I couldn't believe who the culprit behind all of this was, or how messed up the final encounter was, but because it came out of nowhere. Characters are built up and then deflated without fanfare. There is a final confrontation, but it's hollow and seems rushed. It's a weird paradox overall – a game that is simultaneously too short and too padded out, but here we are. It's bound to be another polarizing title, which ultimately shouldn't come as a big surprise. I just wish I could have counted myself among its defenders this time. » **Jeff Cork**

5

Switch

» **Concept**
Catch up with FBI special agent Francis York Morgan and investigate a gruesome crime in the Louisiana town of Le Carré

» **Graphics**
The first game's visuals were dated when it debuted 10 years ago, yet somehow the sequel looks and performs even worse

» **Sound**
The soundtrack is filled with undeniably catchy tunes, and voice performances fit the quirky atmosphere

» **Playability**
An unforgivable frame rate ruins much of the experience, rendering some minigames virtually unplayable and turning the simple act of walking around into a nauseating chore

» **Entertainment**
Revisiting Deadly Premonition's unique sensibility is fun, but aggressively poor production values and shallow gameplay make it tough to stick around

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

Carrion

All tentacles and repetition

7.25

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Developer** Phobia Game Studio **Release** July 23 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept
Control an alien lifeform, feed on humans, grow in size, and do everything you can to escape a facility

» Graphics
The alien's shifting form looks incredible. Tentacles lash out every which way, teeth are in the oddest of places, and humans scream at the sight of it

» Sound
Ominous notes and the crunching of bones ring out in an otherwise quiet game

» Playability
Your beastly hero controls well and its abilities are fun to use, but its fury is held in check by repetitive door-opening missions

» Entertainment
With the gameplay flow struggling to find a pulse, the novelty of controlling a monster doesn't fully take shape

» Replay Value
Moderate

Deep within an underground laboratory, tests are being conducted on an amorphous alien that, depending on how it is positioned, appears to be either all tentacles or teeth. This creature doesn't want to be contained, and would like nothing more than to kill every scientist that poked and prodded it.

In Carrion, you release this alien and guide it as it runs amok through the facility. Within seconds of starting, the alien's tentacles tear humans apart, its teeth bite into their flesh, and the facility – once sterile and pristine – is dripping with blood. This opening salvo of chaos and gore is dark and exhilarating, but nothing that comes after tops the first impression. The thrills of being a monstrous threat wear off quickly, since your progress is mostly tied to figuring out how to remove seals from locked doors. Despite starring an impossible-to-identify creature, Carrion is surprisingly mundane until its final act, where the culmination of ideas truly shine.

The alien's mobility is the highlight, with its many tentacles that can latch onto any surface. Its shape can also morph, so the oozing monstrosity moves through any space quickly, be it a sizable cavern or a tight air vent. The player doesn't have to hit a jump button to make the alien navigate the multi-tiered spaces; it just flows where you want it to go using the left analog stick, a fantastic solution to controlling something so odd. Watching the alien's form shift and contort as it changes directions is mesmerizing and beautifully illustrated by Phobia Game Studio's artists.

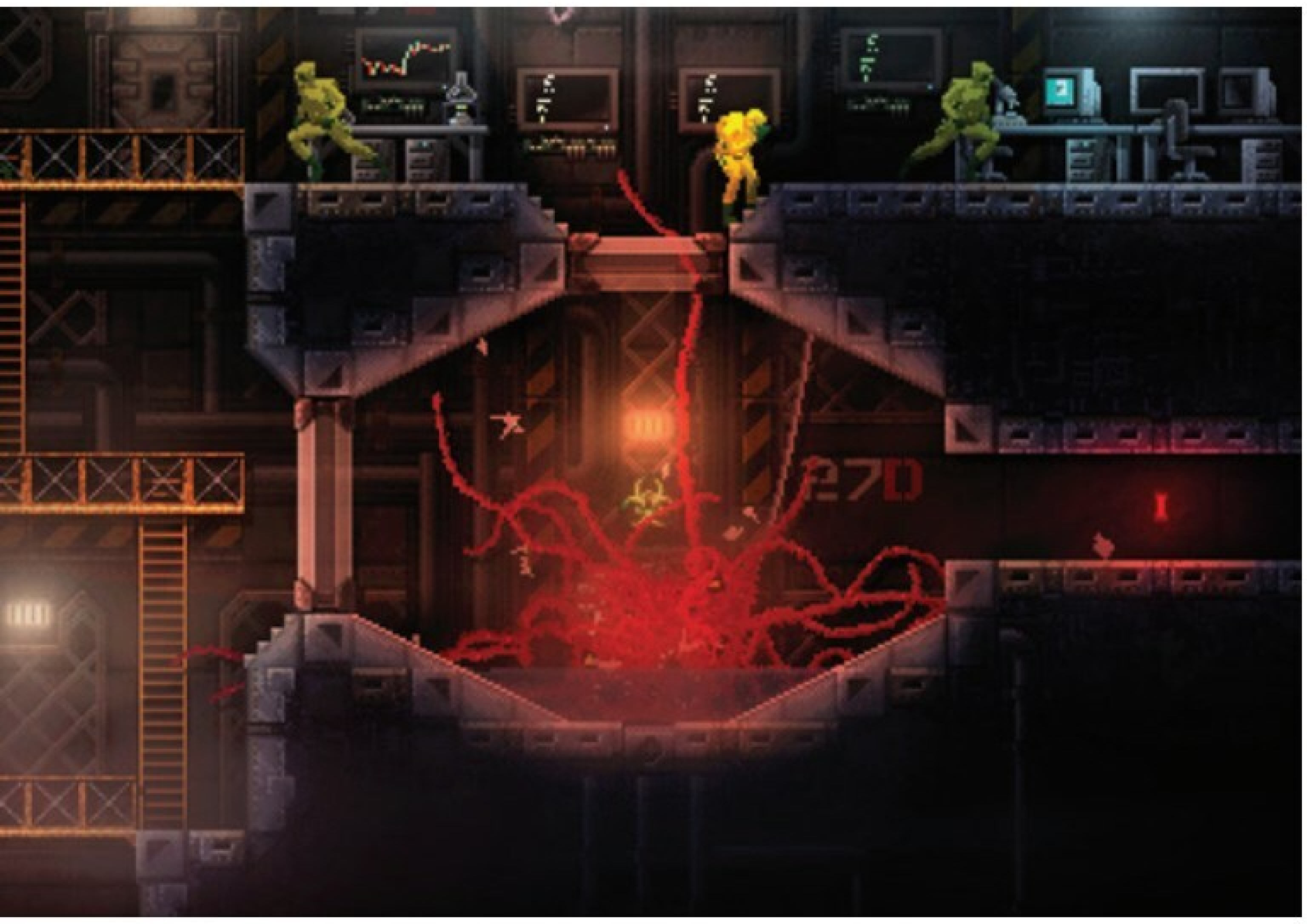
The lab has numerous security systems in place to contain the beast, along with a variety of armed guards. A quick tentacle strike can grab one of these soldiers, and rotating the right analog stick moves the appendage, allowing you to create throwing or smashing motions that deliver results. In one instance, you may want to chuck a metal container at a heavily armored guard to stagger him. In another, you may want to simply smash a foe repeatedly against the floor to end their life. Even though it can be somewhat challenging to figure out the angle of the tentacle being unleashed, these actions are excellently crafted and empower the fantasy of being this peculiar threat. The alien grows in size over time, and can eventually become powerful enough to smash through wood beams, slither through underwater grates, and mind-jack humans to do its bidding – you even use the humans' weapons against their own kind, which is deviously fun.

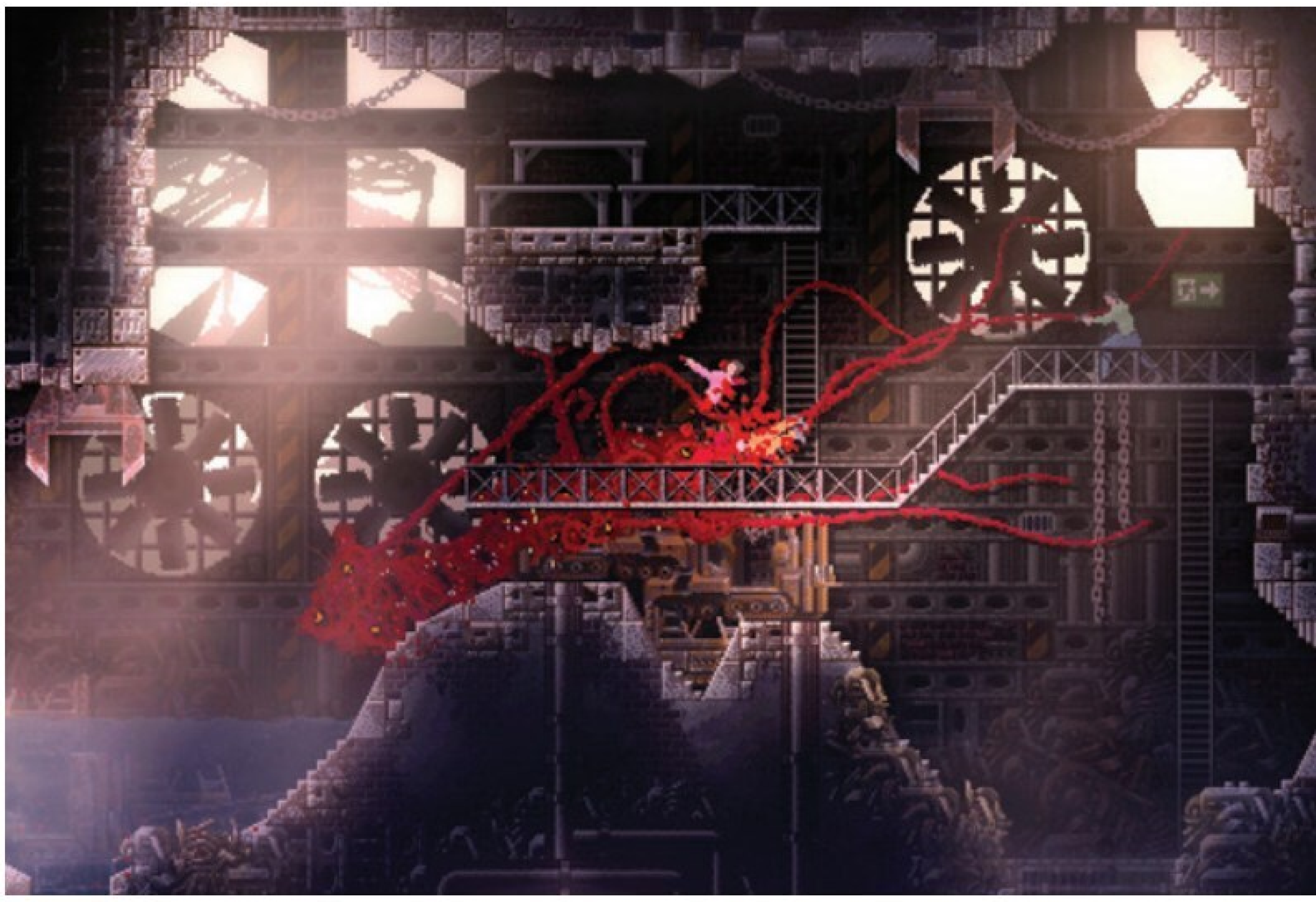
These abilities are put to good use for light environmental puzzle solving. No puzzle is overly complex, and most can be completed in a matter of seconds, usually rewarding the player with a new path to travel. Some puzzles require different alien sizes, which may lead to you feeding more or having to discharge mass in a pool of water. While I like how the alien's form is used for these puzzles, they all lead to seals being removed from doors, which is a monotonous process for the bulk of the experience.

The facility is broken up into small areas that you need to complete to move on. You can't really get lost given each area's diminutive size – which is obviously a good thing – but your goal in almost every zone is always the same: Focus on those seals. To remove a seal, the alien needs to reach a nesting spot within a specific section of the map. When the required number of spots are secured, the seals disappear and the next area becomes available. Your mind is always glued to the doors, and all of the carnage you create is in service to this mundane goal.

Most combat encounters are optional, so if a deadly flamethrower unit lights up the screen, you are better off slithering away. When you are forced to fight, the enemy can pack plenty of firepower, and you may need rip open a mech's armor to reveal the pilot, or hide the alien's mass behind something to take cover. Combat can be enthralling, and often points to how great Carrion's ideas could be. However, it plays too small a role in the experience, and doesn't feel fully realized until that final act where chaos reigns.

With no real story to follow or info given on what the alien is or even what building it is trapped in, Carrion lives and dies by what happens in the moment. The focus on opening up new areas using the same ideas grows stale quick, and robs a fascinating premise of its true potential. I enjoyed playing as an enraged blob, but didn't find much fun in the process of escaping the facility.
» Andrew Reiner





reviews archive

TOUCH		
Half-Life: Alyx	9	325
The Room VR: A Dark Matter	8.5	325

INDEX		
Half-Life: Alyx	9	325

STADIA		
Doom Eternal	9.25	325
Mortal Kombat 11: Aftermath	8.5	327
MotoGP 20	8	326

RIFT		
The Room VR: A Dark Matter	8.5	325

VIVE		
Half-Life: Alyx	9	325
The Room VR: A Dark Matter	8.5	325

PSVR		
The Room VR: A Dark Matter	8.5	325

PS4		
Call of Duty: Warzone	8.75	325
Deliver Us The Moon	8	326
Disintegration	6	327
Doom Eternal	9.25	325
Evan's Remains	7.75	327
Final Fantasy VII Remake	8.75	325
Fury Unleashed	8.5	327
Granblue Fantasy Versus	7.75	325
Last of Us Part II, The	10	327
Maneater	8	327
Minecraft Dungeons	7	327
MLB The Show 20	8.75	325
Mortal Kombat 11: Aftermath	8.5	327
MotoGP 20	8	326
Moving Out	6.5	326
Persona 5 Royal	9.25	325
Predator: Hunting Grounds	7.25	326
Resident Evil 3	9	325
Roundguard	8	325
Sakura Wars	8	326
Streets of Rage 4	7	326
Super Mega Baseball 3	8	326
Trials of Mana	7.75	326

XBOX ONE		
Bleeding Edge	6.75	325
Call of Duty: Warzone	8.75	325
Deep Rock Galactic	8.5	327
Deliver Us The Moon	8	326
Disintegration	6	327
Doom Eternal	9.25	325
Evan's Remains	7.75	327
Fury Unleashed	8.5	327
Maneater	8	327
Minecraft Dungeons	7	327
Mortal Kombat 11: Aftermath	8.5	327
MotoGP 20	8	326
Moving Out	6.5	326
Resident Evil 3	9	325
Roundguard	8	325
Streets of Rage 4	7	326
Super Mega Baseball 3	8	326

SWITCH		
A Fold Apart	7.25	325
Animal Crossing: New Horizons	9	325
Brigandine: The Legend of Runersia	7.5	327
Evan's Remains	7.75	327
Fury Unleashed	8.5	327
In Other Waters	6.25	325
Minecraft Dungeons	7	327
Mortal Kombat 11: Aftermath	8.5	327
MotoGP 20	8	326
Moving Out	6.5	326
Pong Quest	7.25	326
Roundguard	8	325
Streets of Rage 4	7	326
Super Mega Baseball 3	8	326
Treachery in Beatdown City	6.25	325
Trials of Mana	7.75	326

PC		
A Fold Apart	7.25	325
Bleeding Edge	6.75	325
Call of Duty: Warzone	8.75	325
Crucible	6.75	327
Deep Rock Galactic	8.5	327
Deliver Us The Moon	8	326
Disintegration	6	327
Doom Eternal	9.25	325
Evan's Remains	7.75	327
Fury Unleashed	8.5	327
Gears Tactics	8.5	326
Granblue Fantasy Versus	7.75	325
In Other Waters	6.25	325
Maneater	8	327
Minecraft Dungeons	7	327
Monster Train	9	327
Mortal Kombat 11: Aftermath	8.5	327
MotoGP 20	8	326
Moving Out	6.5	326
Pong Quest	7.25	326
Predator: Hunting Grounds	7.25	326
Resident Evil 3	9	325
Roundguard	8	325
Streets of Rage 4	7	326
Super Mega Baseball 3	8	326
Treachery in Beatdown City	6.25	325
Trials of Mana	7.75	326
Valorant	8.5	327
XCOM: Chimera Squad	8	326
Yes, Your Grace	7.75	325

iOS		
A Fold Apart	7.25	325
Roundguard	8	325

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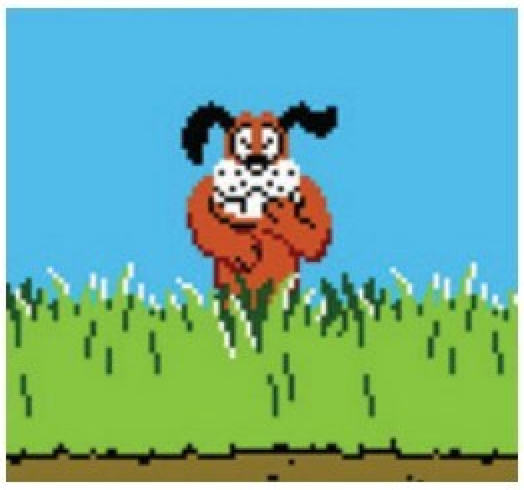
Who's That Good Boy?

Dogs are often a gamer's best friend, but how well do you know your virtual canine companions? Match the names of the following video game dogs with their corresponding images, and then give them a good scratch on the belly. They deserve it.

by Ben Reeves



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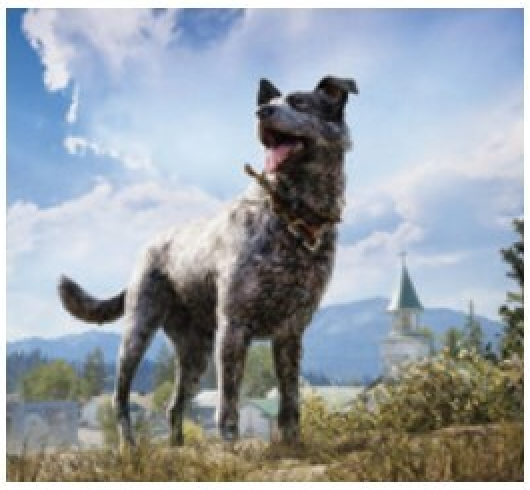

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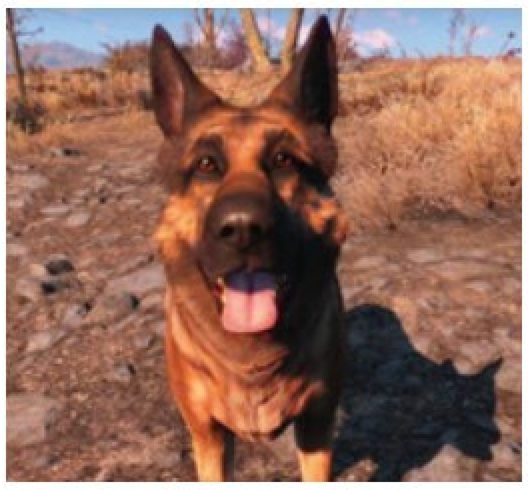

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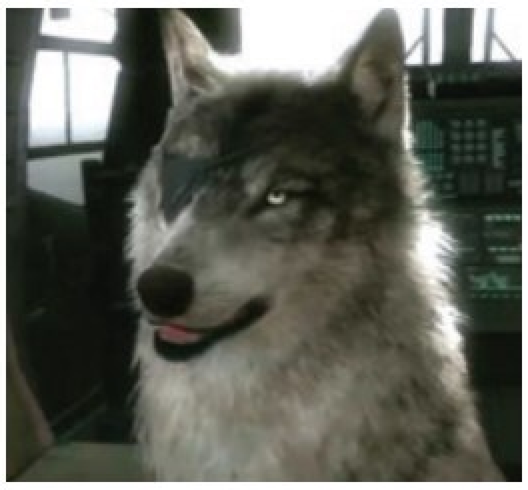

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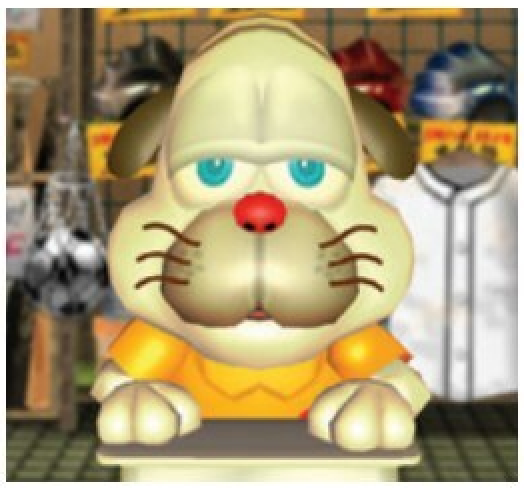

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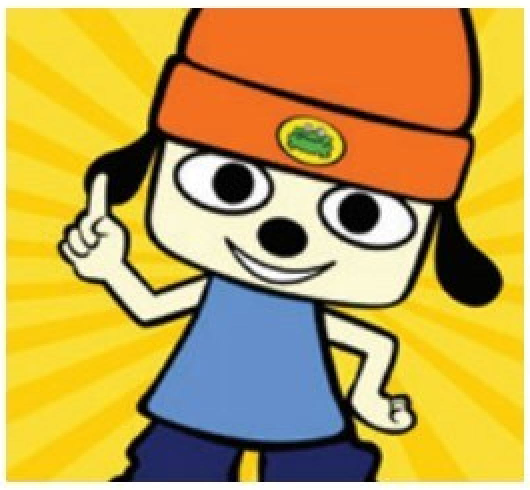

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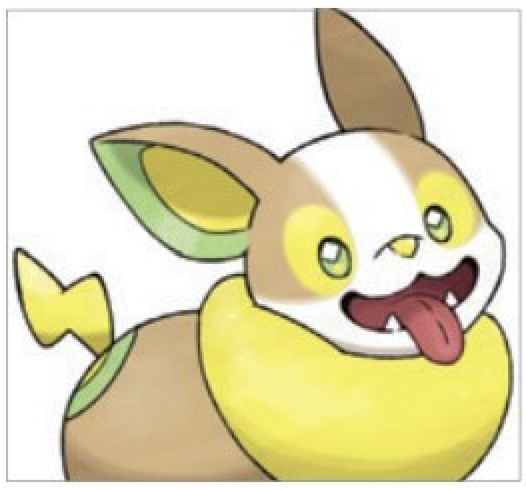

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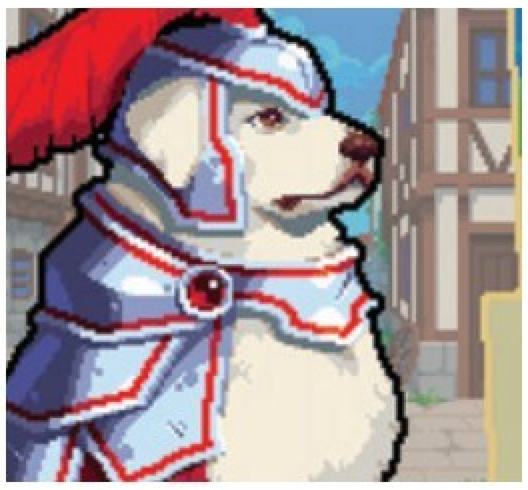

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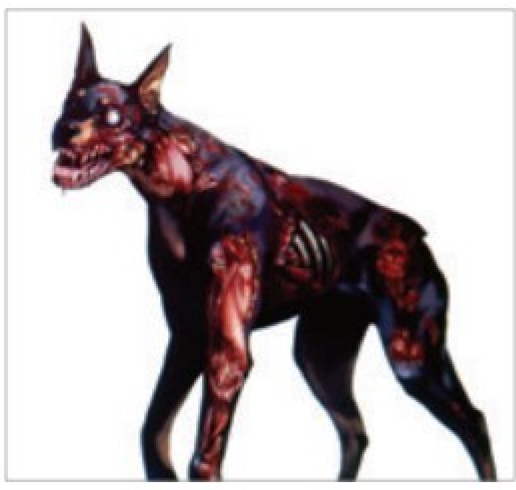

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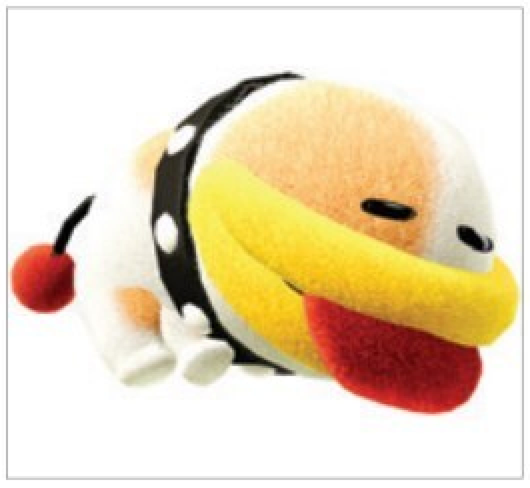

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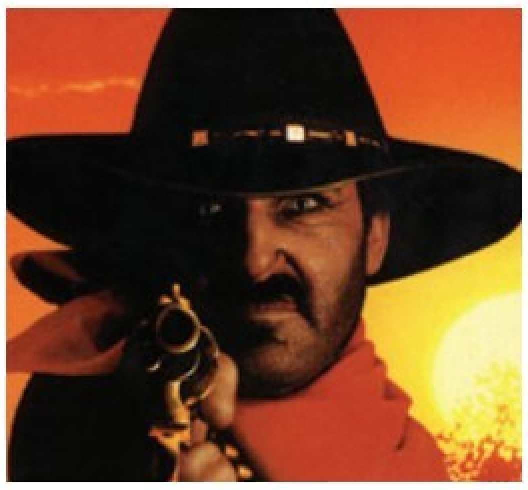

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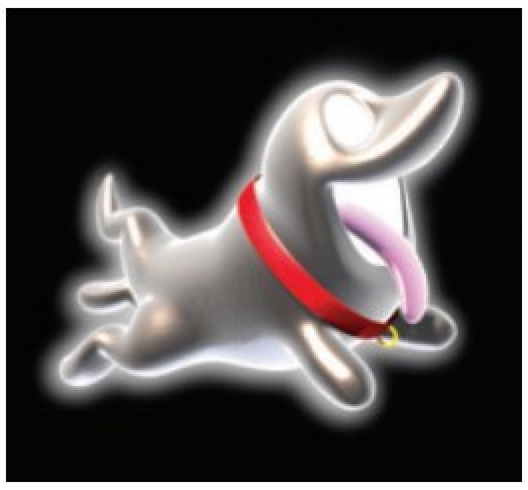

12.

A. PaRappa the Rapper
B. Mad Dog McCree from Mad Dog McCree
C. Rusty from Rusty's Real Deal Baseball
D. D-Dog from Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain
E. Poochy from Yoshi's Crafted World
F. Laughing Dog from Duck Hunt
G. Cerberus from Resident Evil
H. Polterpup from Luigi's Mansion 3
I. Yamper from Pokémon Sword & Shield
J. Boomer from Far Cry 5
K. Dogmeat from Fallout 4
L. Caesar from Wargroove

Answer Key: 1. F, 2. J, 3. K, 4. D, 5. C, 6. A, 7. I, 8. L, 9. G, 10. E, 11. B, 12. H

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